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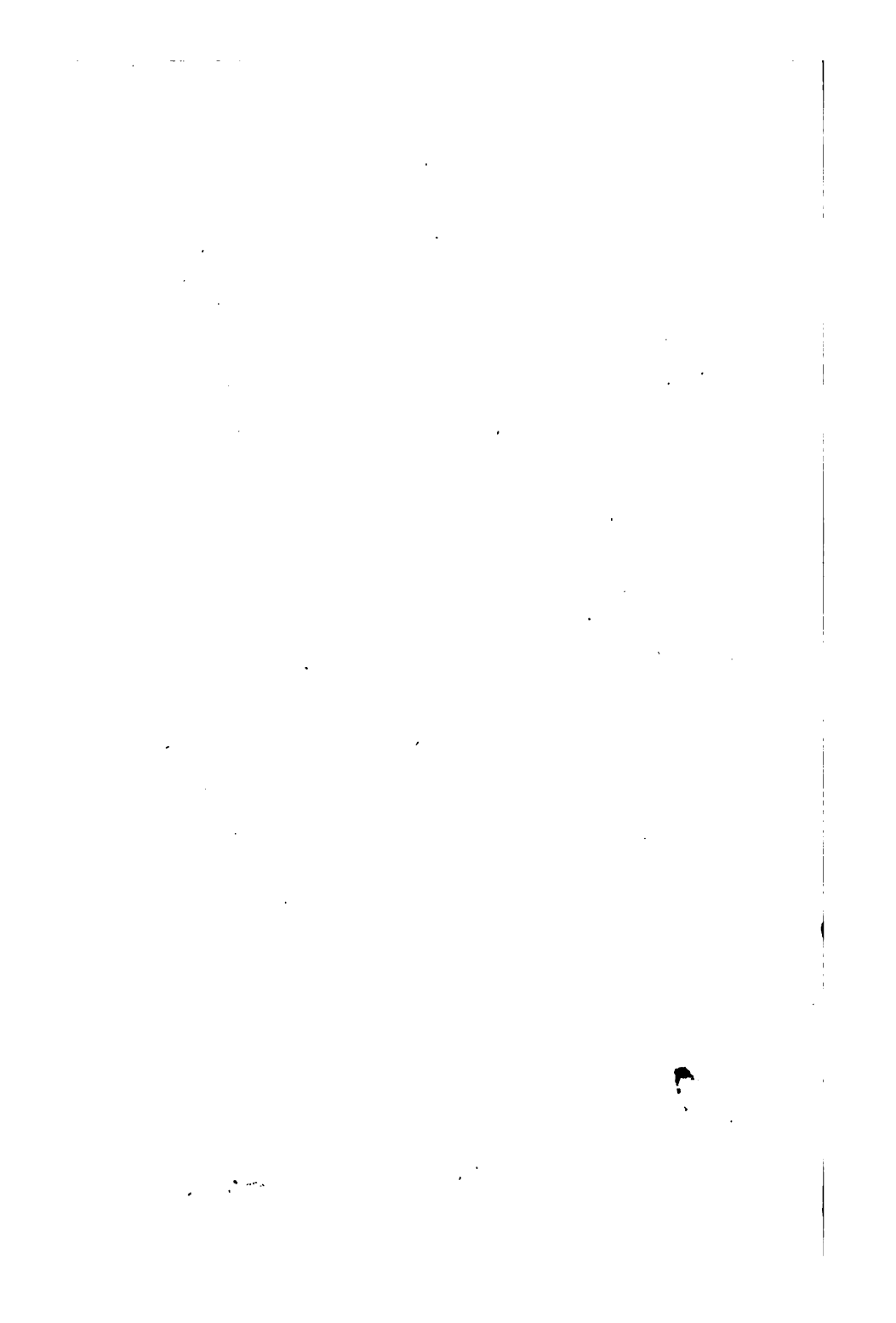
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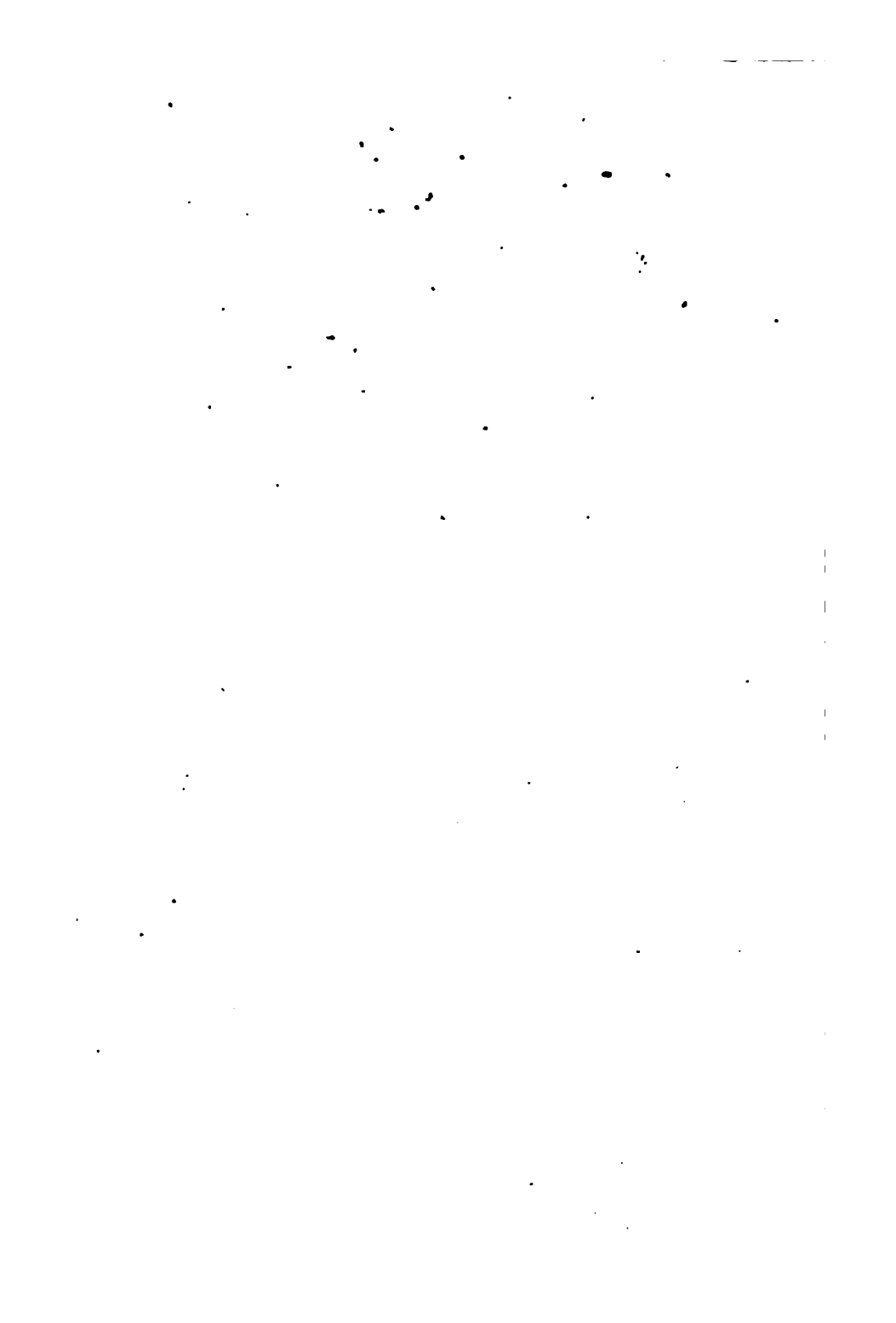
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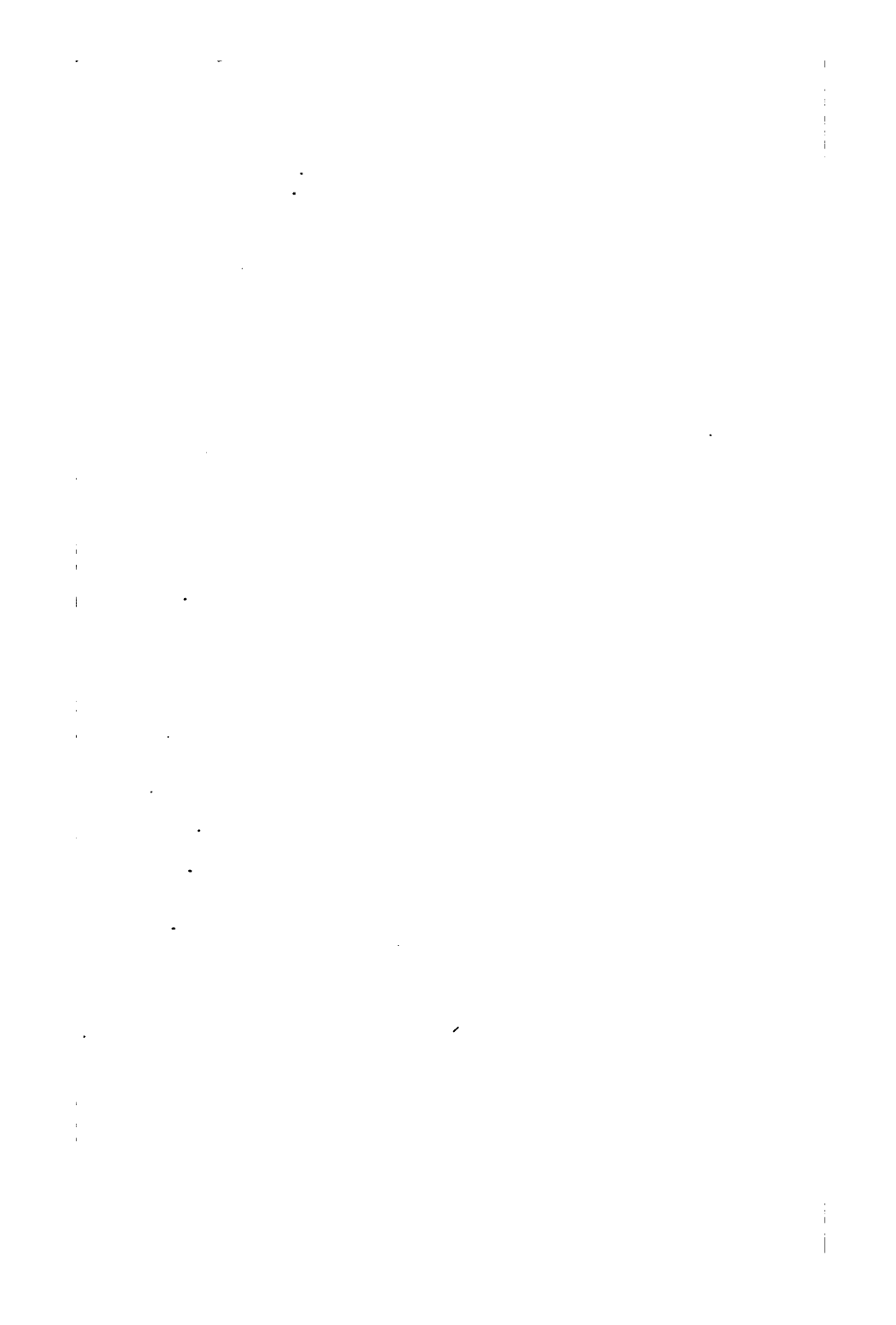




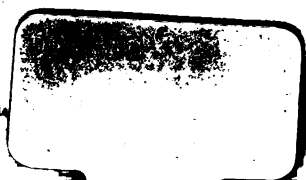


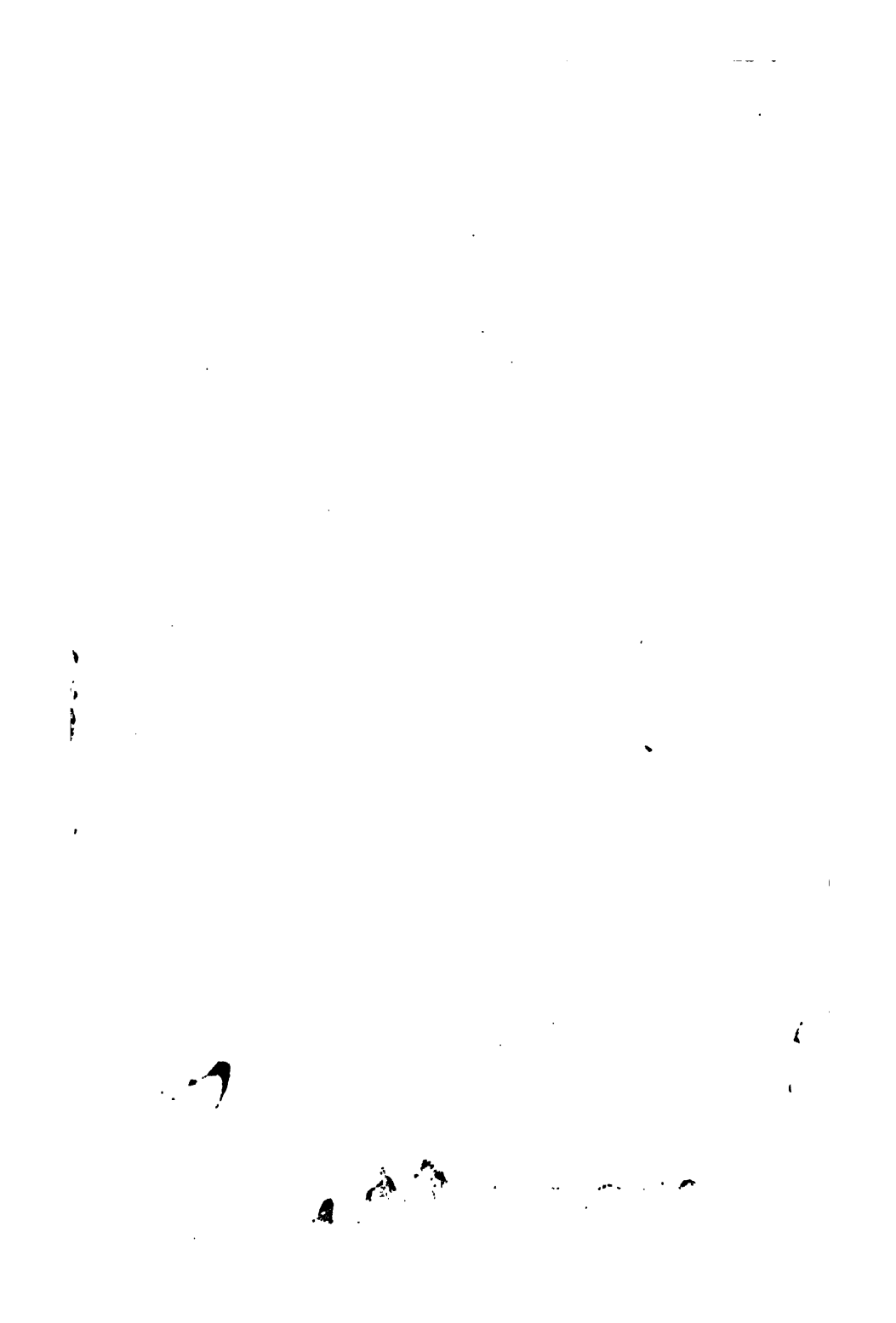


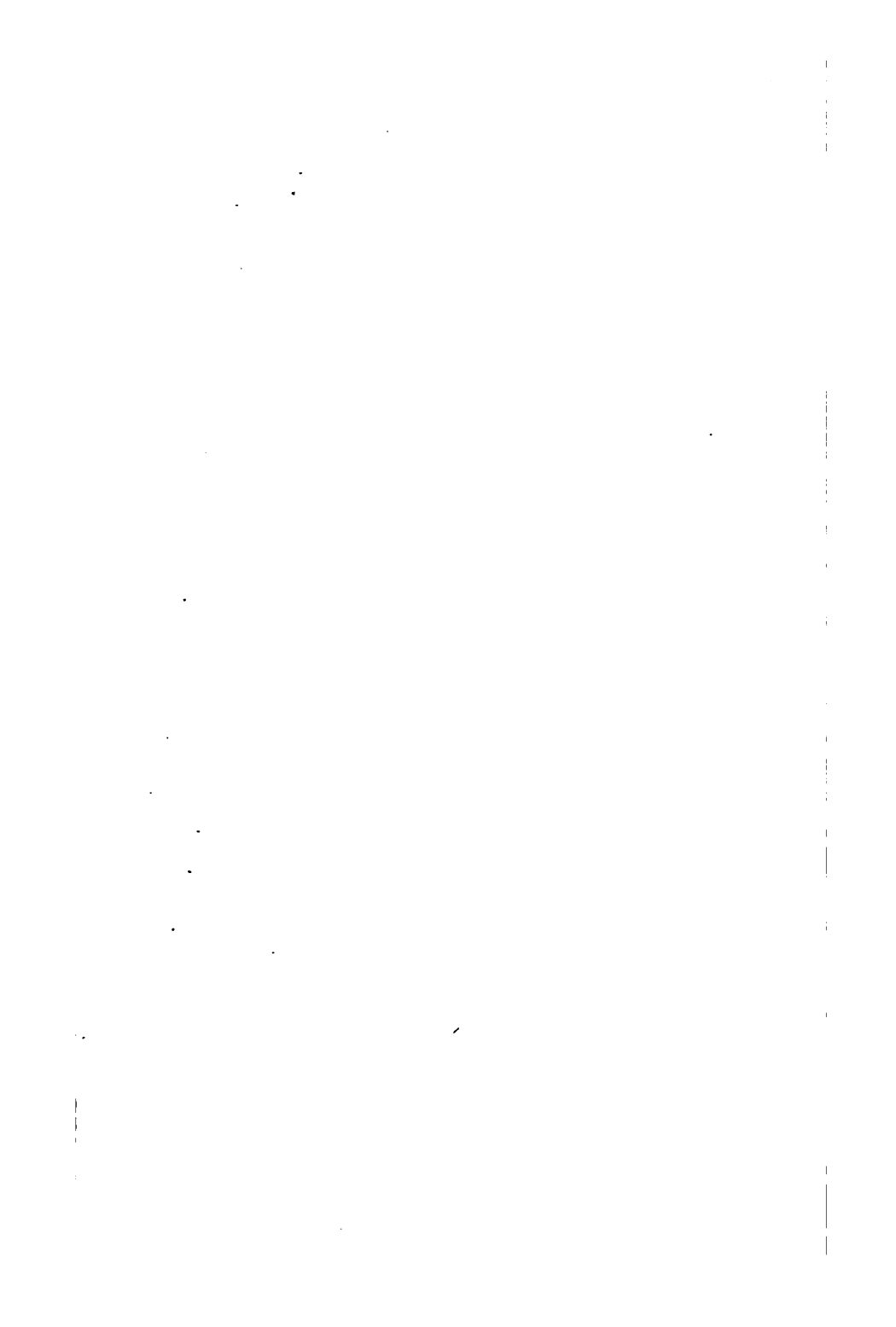




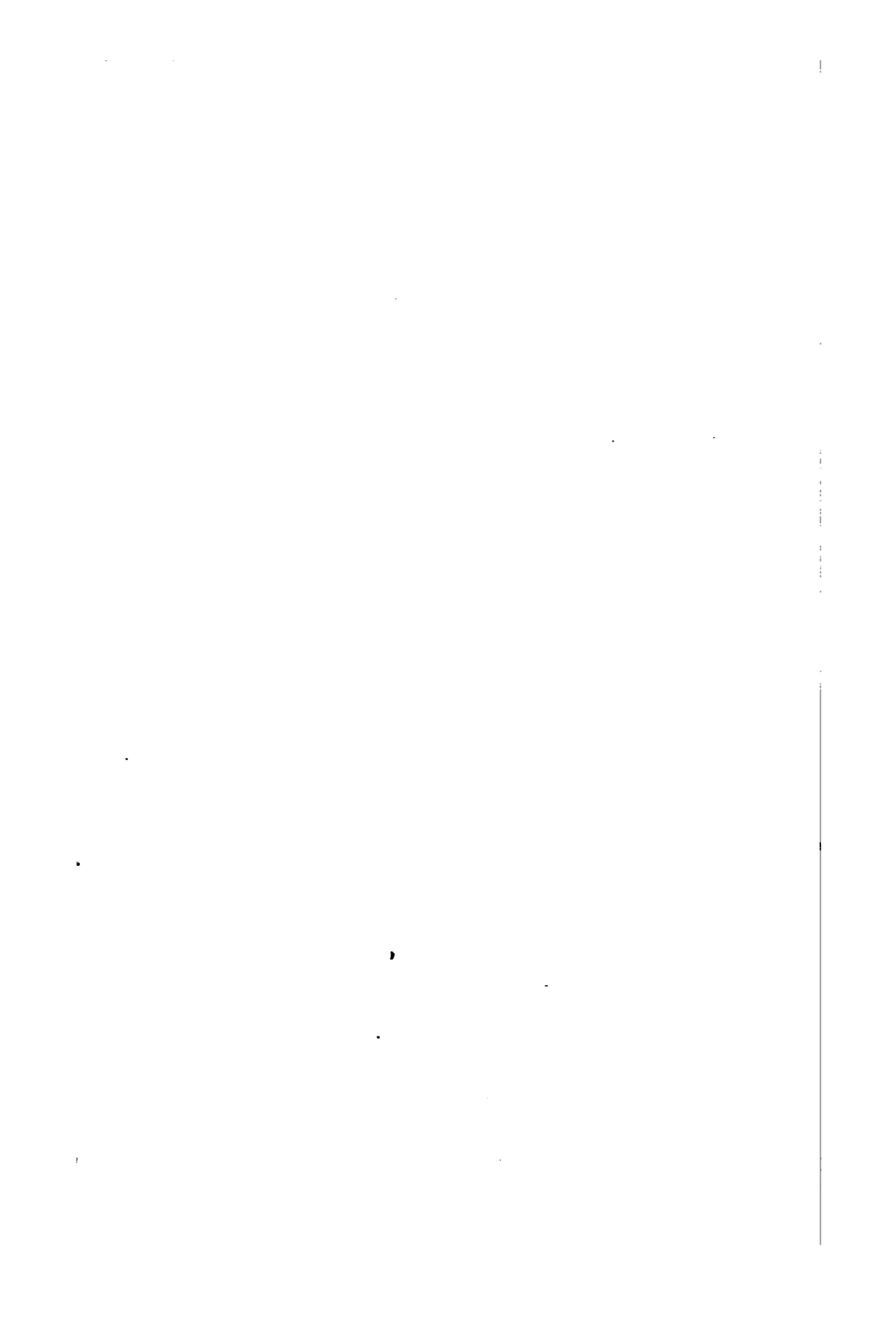
THE INSTIGATOR







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THE INSTIGATOR

BY

ERNEST A. TREETON



LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1903

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE ADVENTURE OF MANUSCRIPT 'E.A. 999'	1
II. A RUFFIAN AND AN ELUCIDATION - -	12
III. A THIEVES' PARLEY - - -	26
IV. DARK DEALINGS, SOME VITUPERATION, AND A MANDATE - - -	35
V. VANISHED JEWELS AND CONJECTURAL SMOKE	47
VII. AN ORCHID, SOME DIAMONDS, AND A LITTLE LOVE - - -	60
VII. BLACK-VISAGED MURDER - - -	69
VIII. SOME BROTHERLY AND SISTERLY HUMOURS, BLENDED WITH A FEW IDEAS - -	79
IX. OVER THE SPILLING OF BLOOD - -	89
X. POINTS FROM A PIECE OF PRECOCITY -	101
XI. A JOURNEY AND ITS EVENTS - -	113
XII. TWO LOVERS AND A DRAWN BADGER -	127
XIII. FROM ELYSIAN POETRY TO DOCKSIDE PROSE	143
XIV. STEPHEN ELGARTH AND HIS MYSTERIES -	154
XV. THE TRAGEDY OF THE DOCKS - -	168
XVI. A GRIM CHASE AND A GRIMMER ENDING -	182

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVII.	CHANGING FORTUNES AND SOME UNEASINESS	191
XVIII.	MYSTERY WITHIN MYSTERY - -	200
XIX.	A WOMAN'S LIFE THAT FAILED - -	215
XX.	BARRIERS—AND THE WAY OVER THEM -	232
XXI.	THE GULF BETWEEN - -	241
XXII.	A STRANGE MEETING AND ITS INCIDENTS -	249
XXIII.	WALLS THAT GIVE FORTH DIAMONDS -	262
XXIV.	A REUNION OF FIRE - -	278
XXV.	LAST SCENE OF ALL - -	298

THE INSTIGATOR

CHAPTER I

THE ADVENTURE OF MANUSCRIPT 'E.A. 999'

A PORTABLE ash-bin, gorged with the refuse of yesterday, and threatening the kerbstone with foul overplus; a frowsy creature in petticoats, gray, ragged, and scurvied, salvaging envied titbits of litter from the bin's zinc gullet; a folded sheet of paper, conned by the shrivelled hag with dry curiosity—not many elements here, it would seem, to the making of a mystery.

But the possibility is one that must wait to be seen.

On three hundred and seven mornings of every year a dilapidated battalion of men and women, boys and girls, may be seen rummaging in the refuse-boxes of shop and office, eating-place and warehouse, in a manner full as stolid and squalid as that of the lustreless beldam now raking over her muck-heap, until the city dust-cart comes along and puts an end to their scavenging.

Whence they come, whither they disappear when the Commissioners of Sewers have made their mean trade as dead for the day as the occupation of Othello, is one of the secrets of a city which is all secrets.

Ninety-nine times in a hundred the harvest of the human grub is rubbish, but once in a while the unexpected happens to verify the law of averages. It was happening now; and here, in this boxed accumulation of filth and garbage, were all the potential germs of grim mystery.

The withered creature paused in her clawing and filching, and held the sheet which she had picked from the potted mess on the kerbstone close to her eyes. Papers torn into fragments she found every morning in plenty, but folded papers, untorn and scarcely crumpled, were rare in her experience, and the novelty of the slip which she now held in her grimy fingers excited her curiosity. She could not read, but she nodded her dirty head with mechanical satisfaction.

‘Figures and writings,’ she muttered—‘figures and writings allus mean sumthin’; ye knows that much, Peggy Sharples, if ye don’t know nuthin’ else. Bill ’ll be able to make it out, and there may be a bottle o’ gin in it. And if you didn’t know what to do with a bottle o’ gin, mum, your name wouldn’t be Mother Sharples.’

Mother Sharples sniffed with an appreciative shiver; for the frost in the air found its way to the marrow of her old bones, and the thought of gin was grateful and comforting to all her members. She folded the sheet with fumbling carefulness, and dropped it, not into her distended sack, but into a pouch of canvas secured to strings, which served the double purpose of keeping her rough reticule in place and of tightening the tatters around her shrunken waist.

Her morning's picking was here at an end. Whatever had been worth dragging from the bin was already in her sack, and shouldering her weird burden, she trudged stolidly towards the kennel that served her for a home. The unsavouriness of the place when at last it was reached was of the kind to leave no room for doubt. The sign displayed upon its door-posts of welcome within was fingered grime, the accrescent blackness of miserly years. Beyond the threshold a dull, sour odour of dirt assailed the nostrils of all who ventured to explore the tenement, which had long ceased to wear the respectable features of a house, and had assumed the disreputable aspect of a sty.

Mother Sharples bumped her way along a short, narrow passage, having a floor caked with half-dry, half-wet mud, to a back room on the

ground-floor, of which, for a weekly tribute of two shillings to an unknown landlord, she was privileged to consider herself the mistress. This corner of the hovel was her bedroom, her kitchen, her parlour, and her warehouse. Dark and dingy almost to filthy blackness, the den seemed to resent the imposition set upon its capacity by resorting to the aid of an overpowering stench ; but if Mother Sharples had ever been sensitive to smell, she had long since surrendered her delicacy in exchange for a hardened insensibility. She dropped her sack into its accustomed corner, and relieved the crick in her back with a thin, vicious grunt. Then she turned and eyed a savage-looking ruffian, who sat in lazy ease by the side of a fire which seemed to be of a temper not less smouldering and sullen than his own.

‘ Well,’ she snapped ; ‘ ain’t you gone yet ?’

‘ No, and I ain’t goin’,’ he returned roughly. ‘ Where’s some brass ?’

‘ Brass—eh, Bill Sharples ; did you say brass ?’ rejoined Mother Sharples ironically ; and she blinked resentfully at Mr. Bill Sharples, who was nominally a docker, actually a loafer, naturally a ruffian, and invariably a thief whenever opportunity offered.

‘ Yes, brass,’ Mr. Sharples amplified, with evil

humour. 'Ain't never heard o' brass before? Brass is stuff you turn on the tap with, and I'm thirsty. D'ye hear?—thirsty.'

'Ye allus is,' agreed Mother Sharples dryly.

'Stow that, d'ye hear?' retorted Mr. Sharples threateningly. 'I suppose ye call yourself a mother. Well, then, bein' a mother is sumthin' to be proud of. So play up to it, Mrs. Sharples. Brass is what I said, and brass is what I mean. D'ye want it more plain?'

'I haven't no brass, and if I had I want it all,' Mother Sharples opposed shrewdly. 'Ye've cost me sixpence a'ready, and it's only Tuesday now. Ye ought to give me sixpence, 'stead o' takin' one; but if ye'd had enough for your kip in your pocket, I don't suppose I'd have seen ye home here last night. No, not much, I fancy.'

'Out with it!' exclaimed the bully fiercely; and, rising from his seat, he kicked the rickety, broken-backed chair into the corner behind him. 'I ain't takin' no slaver; out with it!'

'Struth!' spat Mother Sharples spitefully; 'lay a hand on me, and it's not a squint ye'll get at what I've got in me pocket. M'ah! I thought that 'ud stop ye, ye vaggerbon'—I thought that 'ud stop ye! Ye'll be carney enough now, I expect—now ye think there's a chance o' sumthin'.'

'Well, what d'ye dodge about for?' growled

Mr. Sharples with scowling resentment. 'Why couldn't ye blunt it out at first? What is it?'

For a moment Mother Sharples did not answer. She glared at the coarse brute before her with her little blinking eyes, in which the rheum seemed to have dried up with dust. What he was she had made him, and having made him what he was, the maternal instinct was still dormant within her. He was her son, at whom she hissed like a cat, and for whom she fought like a tigress. He had a short bull neck invested with a choker, a callous, ruffian face, and an evil head, thatched with close-cropped hair. There was no grace of humanity in him. But he was her son.

'Well,' repeated Bill Sharples surlily, 'what is it?'

'Ye don't deserve it, ye rag—ye don't,' declared Mother Sharples with the full rasp of her tongue. 'I ought to mug ye now, I ought—but it's this!'

Mother Sharples fumbled into the depths of her reticule, and producing the sheet of hieroglyphics which had excited her curiosity a while before, presented it to Mr. Bill Sharples for his inspection, with a distension of wrinkle and a display of gum which were expressive of her full relish of her feminine knowingness and advantage.

Mr. Sharples glanced superficially at the paper, and scowled with disgust. What he had expected Mother Sharples to produce was not apparent in his face, but it was plain that he was roused to ugly dissatisfaction.

'What's the game?' he demanded darkly. 'Got a maggit in your head?'

'Read it—read it,' directed Mother Sharples testily. 'People don't throw whole writings away; they tear 'em up first.'

With a villainous lack of grace Mr. Sharples obeyed the maternal injunction; and as he wrestled with his own difficulty in spelling, it became obvious that his interest in the paper keenly increased. His struggling, in other respects, was far from being artificial; for the meaning of the cryptic document was by no means easy to decipher. The text through which Mr. Sharples was laboriously spelling his way was thus composed:

'If diamonds from East India were showered from the celestial dock upon a steamship in mid-ocean, bravely ploughing her way homeward to East Anglia, so that she came to port gemmed from stem to stern, the phenomenon would not be more marvellous than some of the splits of fat fortune which some people are for ever watching to fall into their mouths. A sensible commander

indulges in no such romantic foolishness. Sapient bores may tell him that the earth has existed

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years, but his business is to navigate his ship ; he will find his captain's interest in his state-room, and he will measure and mark the progress of his packet on his chart thrice times nine if need be, in order that he may bring his vessel safely into port, even if on the sailor's unluckiest Friday and at the darkest eleventh hour. He steers his line forward, takes count of his position, and by accurate observation, calculating care and skill, he wins.'

When Mr. Sharples had toiled his way through this curious composition, which seemed to bear all the characteristics of a detached fragment of an elaborate essay, his quickened curiosity seemed to have suppressed some of his natural ferocity.

'Where did ye get it?' he asked, with as much blunt placability as his inborn savageness would permit.

'Outside Aaron Da Costa's, in Bevis Marks. Why? ain't it straight?' squeaked Mother Sharples interrogatively.

'Ain't it straight, eh? Well, supposin' it ain't straight—what then?' grinned Mr. Sharples, with sardonic tantalization.

'What then?' repeated Mother Sharples, with a querulous snap. 'Well, if it ain't straight, it is crooked; that's what. And if it's crooked, I'd like to know what sort of crookedness it is. What's this thing here? It looks like the mark on the bottles of Old Tom.'

'Oh, it's Old Tom ye're after, is it?' Mr. Sharples snarled in rejoinder. 'Old Tom, eh! You and Old Tom are pretty old nosers, and if there had been Old Tom in it, I'd have thought ye'd have smelt it by this time without askin' me. It ain't a ticket for a Christmas Goose Club, let me tell ye.'

Mother Sharples made no reply to this filial speech. The peculiar mark at the foot of the sheet was, as she had picturesquely described it, exceedingly like the mark upon the labels of bottles of Old Tom, its outline being thus formed:



For a moment Mother Sharples blinked alternately at the face of her born ruffian and at the

paper which he held in his hand. Gin was the nectar of her Elysium, and so potent a symbol of her spirituous pleasure of stupefaction was more than she could withstand. With a quickness of movement which was the last thing to be expected of her old bones she suddenly threw out her arm and snatched at the paper with her lean fingers.

‘Ah!’ exclaimed Mr. Sharples, with a hasty oath, ‘ye’d try that lay, would ye? What d’ye mean?’

‘It’s mine!’ spat the old creature viciously—
‘it’s mine, and I mean to have it.’

‘Stow your screechin’,’ muttered Mr. Sharples savagely, as he violently wrenched the paper from Mother Sharples’ hand. ‘Stow it, d’ye hear? and if there’s any Old Tom in it, ye shall have it. What d’ye think you can do with this thing? It ain’t your lay.’

‘Ain’t it my lay?’ cackled Mother Sharples spitefully, mollified, nevertheless, by the promise which had been flung at her. ‘If it isn’t my lay, what’s it mean then? What’s it all about? that’s what I want to know.’

‘Then you’ll have to want,’ returned Mr. Sharples with black sullenness. ‘When I’ve found out what it’s all about, p’raps I’ll tell ye, p’raps I shan’t. If ye found this here thing outside Da Costa’s that’s quite enough for me. What it

means is a downer to me, but it reads tricky enough for a job ; and if there's a job in it, I'm goin' to see where I come in. See? Well, then, keep the clapper mum. There may be a sight more than a bottle o' gin in it, and if there is, ye shall have your share o' the blunt. I'm on the nail with this at once ; and if I can't fake out the meanin' o' this here scratch, I reckon I know who can. It's mum, d'ye hear?'

And with this final injunction Mr. Bill Sharples flung himself out of the malodorous den and disappeared.

CHAPTER II

A RUFFIAN AND AN ELUCIDATION

BRISKNESS was not usually a part of Mr. Bill Sharples' habit. He was naturally economical with his energies, and when he was not enticed into action by an easy piece of robbery, he preferred to prop up the exterior of the tavern at which he was most frequently to be found, and to blink at the honest world streaming past him on its business.

But now Mr. Sharples wasted no time in indulging his preference for lazy ease. He went forward at a steady pace, until the fœtid gully, which was one part mouldy hovel, and one part ramshackle railway arch, lay well behind him in the unlovely area between the Minories and Leman Street, where once dwelt shipmasters in a nautical atmosphere of opulence and sea-worldliness, brought thither by adventurous sails from every clime, but where now Polish Jews revel in Spanish olives, pickled cucumbers, and penurious

A RUFFIAN AND AN ELUCIDATION 13

grease, and expatriated Germans are accommodated with 'a home from home.'

Soon he passed the London Hospital, wherein he expected to be some day with a broken head. He was too bull-like for philosophy; but the broad expanse of the Mile End Road, with its sweep of stony pavement and its wedge of gritty waste, its motley rows of coster stalls, and its serrated lines of unambitious shops, had a character all its own; and Mr. Sharples, with blood freshened by his walk, felt the effect of the amplitude upon his senses as a relief to the cramp of the embedded slum in which he had left his muttering parent.

He presently reached the Paragon Music Hall, and for one whose interest in music was confined entirely to the leaden clink of the pewter-pot, his proceedings outside the doors of that temple of varieties were uncharacteristic and peculiar. He paused and studied the 'star' bills of the entertainment with the manner of one of the cognoscenti. But his eyes found an opportunity to glance with furtive swiftness back along the pavement by which he had approached, and forward along the pavement by which he had yet to advance.

'That's all right,' he muttered to himself easily.

Then he faced about from the doors of the theatre and transferred his interest to the bills upon the lamp-boards which fringed the pavement alongside the roadway. Evidently his eyes were very vagrant this morning ; for his gaze wandered past the bills to the pavement on the opposite side of the road, which it briefly but keenly traced from east to west.

Again Mr. Sharples comfortably murmured to himself, 'That's all right ;' and then proceeded on his way at a much slower rate of speed than he had set himself before.

His course still lay eastward, though Mr. Sharples, to all appearance, was now one of the most casual strollers in the Mile End Road. Two hundred yards further he came to the Brewery, which, with its prim tower, carrying its Jacob's ladder of soaring pipes, is the one thing in East London most persistent in its aspiration heavenward.

Mr. Sharples was not less familiar with the brewery than he was with its beer, but he had apparently reached ground which induced him to congenial ease. He drew from his waistcoat pocket the stump of a cutty clay, the bowl of which he comfortably filled with rank shag as he walked. His search for a match was not so placidly effected ; he dipped and fumbled his

A RUFFIAN AND AN ELUCIDATION 15

fingers into the awkward corners of his pockets, and he did not succeed in securing a lucifer match until he had reached the corner of St. Peter's Street. Then he went to the corner of the brewery wall to strike a light.

Anyone who had observed Mr. Sharples wrestling with his pockets would have perceived that his matches were few, and would have understood that his object in seeking the shelter of the brewery wall was to make the most of them. The observer would also have understood the interest of Mr. Sharples in the direction of the wind. The breeze seemed to come from the quarter which Mr. Sharples had lately left in his wake, and to necessitate his facing the stretch of pavement which he had just traversed.

Mr. Sharples' unpleasant fingers covered the bowl of his pipe; he puffed with quiet concentration; he did not appear to have time for more than a blink; but his glance, though no one would have vowed that he glanced, flitted along the rearward pavement and across the road to the path on the opposite side of the way.

Then his light blew out, and he went, with his thumbs and fingers fumbling in his waistcoat pockets, round the corner into St. Peter's Street. There his success was immediate, and his glance up the street was quite unconcealed.

Satisfied with his reconnoitring, Mr. Sharples boldly went forward.

‘Seems as if it wasn’t a split’s day out. We’re all right up to now, anyway,’ he summarized for his own entertainment. ‘And now we’ll see what this here little fake means.’

St. Peter’s Street, with its terraced houses, dignified with basement areas, and with at least two steps to the front-doors, seemed to vouch for that section of East End respectability; and even Mr. Sharples, though confident in his progress, was circumspect in his bearing. He modestly compressed himself against the line of railings, and when he reached the open gate of No. 199, he quietly slipped down the area steps and knocked at the area door.

A diminutive slattern answered his summons, and eyed him with a shrewd, scrutinizing stare, which was at once an interrogation and an optical analysis.

‘Whatcher want?’ she challenged tentatively.

‘The guvner,’ replied Mr. Sharples practically.

‘Ain’t at ‘ome,’ retorted the miniature witch.

‘Ain’t he?’ grinned Mr. Sharples. ‘Then tell him Bill Tough wants to see him.’

‘Show the gent in, ‘Liza,’ directed a moist, puffy feminine voice from a convenient location rearward; and Mr. Sharples, with the temporary

title of gent, was shown in. He was met by the owner of the frothy voice, whose dropsical appearance confirmed the throaty suggestion of much porter from the tavern at the neighbouring corner.

‘How is it, Mr. Tough—all right?’ she suggested oozily, by way of welcome. ‘We’re daisies for daylight.’

‘I believe ye, Mrs. Nickens,’ gruffed Mr. Sharples, as pleasantly as his ruffianism permitted. ‘Give me daisies, says me. I’m a daisy myself, and I reckon things couldn’t be righter.’

‘That’s all right,’ approved Mrs. Nickens, with understanding. ‘Liza, show Mr. Tough up. Nickens don’t look for much smoke during the day, ye know, Mr. Tough. His friends is mostly busy till night-time. But he’ll take a dror with ye, I dessay.’

Pioneered by the juvenile Hecate, Mr. Sharples was already ascending the narrow stairs to the parlour floor overhead; but evidently the use of the parlour floor was restricted to high days and festivals, for the small creature who cannily led the way continued her course up the bedroom-stairs.

‘He’s in here,’ she announced to Mr. Sharples summarily, as she came to a pause before the door of a back bedroom at the top of the house.

‘Mr. Nickens,’ she went on, raising her shrewd voice, ‘here’s somebody to see you, Mr. Nickens. It’s all right—missus sent him up.’

‘Who is it?’ grumped a voice from behind the door.

‘Calls himself Mr. Tough—Mr. Bill Tough,’ amplified ‘Liza shrewdly.

‘No plant, Nickens; it’s me O.K.,’ supplemented Mr. Sharples familiarly. ‘Got a pinch, I think.’

A muffled growling, followed by a sound of boxes being closed, came through the door; and the prematurely old woman, accepting the audible proceedings of Mr. Nickens as a sign that Mr. Sharples was a fit and proper person to be allowed to wait until Mr. Nickens chose to open the door, betook herself to the doubtful moral atmosphere diffused by Mrs. Nickens below stairs.

Mr. Sharples himself was not long kept waiting. In the course of three or four minutes Mr. Nickens had apparently arranged his retreat to his satisfaction; for he then turned the key in the lock, and with an economization of space born, no doubt, of a naturally careful disposition, he meagrely opened the door. As a measure of prudence, presumably, he scrutinized Mr. Sharples with a scowl which comprehended him from head to toe; and then he opened the door to a sufficient width of

space to admit Mr. Sharples to the scant privilege of an audience.

Why Mr. Sharples broke into a villainous grin on crossing the threshold was not immediately obvious, but there was certainly no doubt that he grinned. A couple of large boxes, two chairs, a deal table against the window, and a pair of cheap lace curtains drawn across the window-frame, constituted the sole furniture of the room; yet Mr. Sharples was curiously interested in the appearance of the apartment.

‘Smashin’, Sammy?’ he suggested, with ugly humour, as Mr. Nickens again closed and locked the door. ‘S’elp me never! why don’t you scrap up clean? If I was a snark I could down ye on this.’

Mr. Sharples was regarding a splash of molten lead on the hob of the fire-grate, and Mr. Nickens was evilly contemplating Mr. Sharples.

‘You rag!’ remarked Mr. Nickens, with an unpleasant hiss. ‘You could do the downy, could you? What do you mean? What d’you mean by coming here by daylight?’

‘It’s all right, Sammy,’ returned Mr. Sharples conciliatingly. ‘You lay on me. Don’t you think I was such a jake as to come here without me eyes open. There ain’t no spots about—I took mighty good care to make sure o’ that.’

‘Well, now you are here, what d’you want?’ demanded Mr. Nickens blackly.

‘This,’ explained Mr. Sharples, not quite lucidly; but he produced his script, and spread it at large upon the table. ‘It beats me. The old woman found it outside Da Costa’s this morning, and I reckoned you’d be about the only one I could nab to make it out. But honour bright—between ourselves, ye know.’

Mr. Nickens, who did not immediately comment upon Mr. Sharples’ communication, did not wear the appearance of a sage. Though his dress was curtailed to the smallest possible limits, comprising no more than a coat and a shirt, with a pair of trousers and a yoke of braces, he was himself a person of very full habit. He was evidently as fond of eating as Mrs. Nickens was of drinking. In bulk he matched her admirably; but his flesh, though meaty, was firmer, and it did not convey the humid suggestion of copiousness which was Mrs. Nickens’s distinguishing characteristic. The appearance of Mr. Nickens was not wholesome, and he certainly seemed to be more of a bookmaker than a savant; but appearances are deceitful. For some moments he studied the paper which Mother Sharples had found in unbroken silence; and it was hard to tell whether he was penetrating the meaning of the written composition, or was con-

sidering whether he should admit Mr. Sharples to a full share of his understanding. As for Mr. Sharples, he was beginning to bubble with impatience.

‘What sort o’ fake d’ye make of it?’ he inquired presently.

‘Got any notion what this is?’ asked Mr. Nickens curtly, at last.

‘Not so much as a sheep’s head, ’pon me sivvy,’ replied Mr. Sharples with blunt candour. ‘Shouldn’t have brought it to you if I had. That’s straight enough, ain’t it?’

‘What would you have done, then?’ Mr. Nickens queried, with a mysterious snigger.

‘What?’ echoed Mr. Sharples readily. ‘Why, have stuck to it myself, that’s what. Ye ought to know Tough Bill well enough for that.’

‘Would you!’ returned Mr. Nickens, ignoring Mr. Sharples’ final self-complimentary observation.

At this rejoinder Mr. Sharples looked Mr. Nickens hard in the face, evidently endeavouring to puzzle his way to Mr. Nickens’s unspoken meaning.

‘Now, look here, Sam Nickens,’ he remarked, with dry emphasis; ‘this is my snap, and I’m on the square with it. I’ve had a notion that there’s a pot in this thing, and if there is I haven’t come here without meanin’ to go nob and nob.’

‘You wouldn’t if you did,’ retorted Mr. Nickens

with sardonic complacency. 'You wouldn't get far with this trick on your own fist.'

'Well, then, what is it?' growled Mr. Sharples with gruff concession.

'What is it?' repeated Mr. Nickens methodically; 'it's a fence's snip. And, what's more, it's the snip of the biggest nob at the game.'

Mr. Sharples shook himself with prospective energy and immediate satisfaction.

'Where's the mark?' he queried readily. 'I reckoned there was a pointer in it somewhere.'

'Don't know,' answered Mr. Nickens, without removing his scowl from the paper.

'Don't know?' echoed Mr. Sharples, unwilling to be credulous of that assurance.

'No,' gruffed Mr. Nickens shortly.

'Then how d'ye know it's a snip; and how d'ye know whose it is?' demanded Mr. Sharples, not without reason.

'Because I do,' returned Mr. Nickens bluntly.

'The writing is good enough for me.'

'D'ye know it, then?'

Mr. Sharples' satisfaction was shrinking, and he was feeling himself personally injured.

'What do you think? D'you think I should fool myself by saying I knew it if I didn't?'

Mr. Nickens's pride in his expertness evidently did not take kindly to doubt.

'Well, what are ye goin' to do?' Mr. Sharples inquired, with a not unnatural desire for an understanding.

'Fish it out—if I can,' announced Mr. Nickens laconically.

'Then you had better "can,"' suggested Mr. Sharples doggedly. 'I don't see no snuff in lettin' a grab slide, if ye can fix on to it. What d'ye reckon them figures?'

'Them figures, my tyke, is the key to this little scratch, if you can make 'em out,' explained Mr. Nickens, with congenial aggravation.

'Can't you?' rebuffed Mr. Sharples, with a resentful sense of ill-usage. 'Blow it! what was the good of me comin' to you for? Ye ain't no more good than nuthin'. Why can't ye make 'em out?'

'Because I can't—not yet,' snorted Mr. Nickens roughly. 'Pawn your head, and I'll see what I can do.'

Mr. Sharples complied with this choice direction to keep his tongue between his teeth, and for ten minutes Mr. Nickens knit his brows and scowled at the written paper without speaking. Then he gave vent to spasmodic grunts, punctuated with mechanical mutterings, suggestive of his verbal expiscation of 'twos,' 'fives,' 'fours,' and 'threes,' and of his mental wrestling with the hidden mean-

ing which they might portend. Finally, his brow cleared with a free sweep, and he banged his fist upon the table.

'Struth!' he ejaculated, with a rough, exultant oath; 'I've got it! Come here, you blind moke. See that second row of figures? Well, the nick begins there, and the top row continues it; the bottom row—the total—is only a blind. What's the first figure in the second row?'

'Two,' announced Mr. Sharples with villainous alacrity.

'Right you are,' approved Mr. Nickens, with blunt commendation. 'Now, what's the second word in the first line?'

'“Diamonds,”' declared Mr. Sharples, his savage cupidity now fully aroused.

'Right you are again, my choker,' Mr. Nickens again commended. 'And the fourth word is “East,” and the fifth “India.” But as three is the next number, and three doesn't come after five, that is a snip that we must go to the next line; and word number three on the next line is “Dock.” That's “Diamonds, East India Dock,” altogether. Twig, you tyke?'

'But what's them two sixes?' queried Mr. Sharples, in bubbling curiosity and mystification.

'The first six counts, the second don't,' expounded Mr. Nickens, with gruff self-satisfaction.

‘You can’t have two sixes on the same line, so the second is a full-stop to that line. That’s because the word to be counted on the next line is number seven. My——!’ broke off Mr. Nickens with impious admiration. ‘It’s fly, mighty fly; and nobody not up to the trick would have got round it. All the noughts stand for lines that don’t count, and that itself is a floorer. And it wanted a Sam Nickens to spot that there are only eight words to every line.’

‘And what’s this fake here?’ inquired Mr. Sharples, pointing to the sign which had excited Mother Sharples’ curiosity.

‘That’s the mark on the thing to be nabbed,’ amplified Mr. Nickens complacently.

Then Mr. Nickens took pencil and paper and wrote; and the message delivered by the counting of the text was :

‘Diamonds, East India Dock ; steamship *East Anglia*. Splits watching. Captain’s state-room Mark of packet thrice times nine. Friday, eleventh hour. Line forward, count position.’

The two rogues stood and stared at each other.

CHAPTER III

A THIEVES' PARLEY

MR. SHARPLES was first to give expression to his feelings when the meaning of Mother Sharples' strangely-found manuscript was finally disclosed. He regarded the written sheet, which still lay upon the table, with quite an amiable scowl, and evinced a disposition to favour it with the respect due to a fetich.

'Well, I'm blowed,' he observed, delivering himself with a gust. 'What d'ye reckon your price for diamonds—eh, Sammy? Diamonds is a luxury, ain't they, old lead-basher?'

Mr. Nickens, not being a humorist, failed to appreciate the drollery of Mr. Sharples with the cordiality which its spirit merited.

'I'm a basher, am I?' he snarled, with a free display of teeth. 'The spelling of bash, Bill Sharples, is b-a-s-h—b-a-s-h, d'you understand? Would you like to be b-a-s-h-e-d?'

'Huh!' parried Mr. Sharples, with rough dis-

cretion. 'What are ye flyin' your wool for? Can't no one chip ye a bit? I don't care a tinker whether ye smash enough to break the Mint, or whether ye don't. What I want to know is—where we are! To-day's Tuesday. What are we goin' to do?'

'Do! Get pinched, most likely,' responded Mr. Nickens pleasantly. 'You don't suppose the cove who dropped this is going to forget what is waggled into it, do ye? Not much. He'll be on the job next Friday, you can lay your life.'

The prospect of nefarious competition by no means pleased Mr. Sharples, and he manifested his resentment of it in the sullenness of his tone.

'Whose tip is it, d'ye think?' he asked roughly.

'How should I know?' returned Mr. Nickens, with little better amiability. 'This isn't a greener's job, with the 'tecs out, you can swallow that for a fact. And if you got this thing from outside Da Costa's, you're not going to pick up those sparklers as if they were a penn'orth o' whelks. That's another fact. If this is anybody's snap, I reckon it's Joe Custer's and his little lot.'

'Why?' inquired Mr. Sharples, with disgusted interest.

'Because he's a dabster at this particular sort o' game—you oughtn't to want telling that,' Mr.

Nickens enlarged, in a tone which indicated that Mr. Sharples should be familiar with the obvious. 'He's made sparklers his pet fancy, and he's got the lay o' the game. Besides which, Da Costa's is his find for those in the know. A regular dab, take him all round, is Joe Custer, Billy Sharples; and you can lay the dome of St. Paul's to a quart can on that.'

'—— Joe Custer!' exclaimed Mr. Sharples, with ugly sincerity.

'Yes, certainly —— Joe Custer,' agreed Mr. Nickens, with grim consent. 'Brain Joe Custer, if he'll let ye; only you'd better be slippy how you go about it. He don't walk about with tracts, don't Joey C., and he don't shoot texts at you when it comes to scrapping. His arguments are thundering solid, and it generally wants a stretcher to carry the effects home.'

'Well, then, we've got to go on the dishin' lay,' hazarded Mr. Sharples by way of proposition.

Mr. Nickens grinned saturnine acquiescence. 'That's it,' he nodded—'the dishing lay.'

'Then give it a name, and I'm on with ye,' intimated Mr. Sharples, with ugly readiness.

Mr. Nickens twisted his lips again, and the conversation went forward in a strange pugnacious manner of give and take.

'It ain't so easy,' said Mr. Nickens, with dry terseness.

'Why?' blurted Mr. Sharples, in blunt demand.

'Because this is a tricky put-up, this is, Billy Sharples. The fence who is behind it doesn't take any risks; and if Joe Custer has given him the tip that he has lost this pretty little bit of twiddlum—well, Mr. Joe Custer won't go to the East Indy Docks next Friday night—not to pinch, anyway. And if you go, Billy Sharples, without being pretty cocksure o' the lay, it's most probable that you'll be fished out o' the dock for dead dog.' Mr. Nickens evidently enjoyed his description of Mr. Sharples' final descent to the dogs with supreme relish.

'We'll see about that,' Mr. Sharples sniffed savagely. 'Who is the tinker who put this up? d'ye know him? Give me a chance to spot him, and if I don't lay him out, don't you give me a fist in any more jobs you've got to bring off.'

'Tinker, eh?' grunted Mr. Nickens. 'Well, all I know about the tinker is what I've told you. When I tell you that he's the biggest nob at the game, you can take it for a fact. I'm a bit of a fence myself, but I can't pay his prices for swag—in square money, anyhow. Who he really is nobody knows, and where he hangs out nobody knows. He's got half-a-dozen different stands;

some in Epping Forest, some on Hampstead Heath, and some in Richmond Park. No bricks and mortar for him—he's a sight too fly for that. Good prices, no questions, leave him on the spot—that's his motto ; and even his own regular snicks don't know where he dosses.'

'Ever seen him ye'self ?' queried Mr. Sharples, with disreputable interest.

'No ; I'm not in his kink. Whenever he wants to put any of his regular kidneys on to a job he knows where to give 'em the nod, the same as with this plant, which I reckon is Joe Custer's. They know his spots, and his regular days, and that's quite enough for him.'

'Hasn't he ever been lagged ?' inquired Mr. Sharples, as if he regarded that consummation as devoutly to be wished.

'No, not much,' rejoined Mr. Nickens dryly. 'He's too good for that. If any of his daisies get nabbed, a pard in the know takes their place ; so they don't let business hang up.'

'Well,' observed Mr. Sharples, with sour disappointment, 'if we can't bosh the tinker, there's one thing we can do : we can shadow Joe Custer.'

'Won't work,' Mr. Nickens dismissed, with a snigger. 'I should like to see you, or anyone else, shadowing Joe Custer. Do you think you could ?'

'Yes,' growled Mr. Sharples evilly.

'Not you,' sniffed Mr. Nickens, with fresh enjoyment. 'Joe Custer would spot you before you had been at it half an hour. Then you would lose sight of Joe Custer, but he wouldn't lose sight of you. He'd mark you, and you would be in the London Hospital, or the nearest mortuary, before night was out. No, Billy Sharples; you'd better give up Joe Custer. I suppose your game was to shadow him, and find the tinker, as you call him. And when you found the tinker, I suppose your notion was to crack his brain-pot, so that he couldn't spoil your little pitch for Friday night. How would you like to be shot on sight? If I know the tinker right end up, he don't stop at much.'

'Well, what would be your own dodge?' demanded Mr. Sharples in surly discontent.

'I reckon my lay is a quiet sniff at Da Costa's,' replied Mr. Nickens potentially.

'Then I'm with ye,' announced Mr. Sharples with emphasis.

'You think so? I don't,' returned Mr. Nickens, coolly blunt.

Mr. Sharples stared at Mr. Nickens with familiar ferociousness.

'You don't? — ye! what d'ye mean?' he spluttered, fixing Mr. Nickens with a black scowl.

'D'you want your jaw cracked? If you don't you had better steady on,' advised Mr. Nickens pleasantly.

'No bilk, then. Say what your rig is, and out with it,' retorted Mr. Sharples sullenly.

'Do you think I am such a crock as to work Da Costa's with a crowd?' suggested Mr. Nickens sarcastically.

'Two ain't a crowd,' protested Mr. Sharples, doggedly.

'No, it isn't; but it's one too many. You can take the tip from me that I'm the cock of this walk. What do you think you'd get out of it without me? Nixes. And I shan't get any more out of it playing the game by myself. Is that good enough for you?—because, if it isn't, you can sling yourself down East Indy Dock way, and be hanged to you!'

Mr. Nickens gave Mr. Sharples the full force of his glower, and waited for his reply.

'Is it straight?—that's all I want to know,' insisted Mr. Sharples, with a snarling disposition towards reluctant consent.

'Is it straight!' repeated Mr. Nickens disgustedly. 'Haven't I just said that I can't work all the job alone any more than you can? You look like working Da Costa's with me in your rig, don't you? You talk like a wump. Either

I work Da Costa's, and take my swag for the tec.'s part o' the business, or up goes the donkey.'

'All right, I'm willin',' grumped Mr. Sharples in final agreement. 'When will ye slide into Da Costa's?'

'To-night. D'you think there's any time to lose?' queried Mr. Nickens expertly.

'No, I don't; but what I want to know is, what time ye're goin' to see me afterwards. I don't see no fun in bein' in the dark,' submitted Mr. Sharples in a mood of lingering dissatisfaction.

'Meet me at the Old King Harry at half-past ten. If I've got any Custer snuff for you then, you shall have it. If I haven't, ye'll have to trust to devil's luck,' advised Mr. Nickens grimly.

'Why?' Mr. Sharples was suspicious again, and when he was in that mood he showed the vicious Mr. Sharples unmistakably.

'Because, if I don't get a kinch on Joey Custer to-night, I shan't to-morrow night, or the night after. Two nights running at Da Costa's would make Joey C. smell rats. That's why, my cock-bird; and you can whistle to that,' explained Mr. Nickens in a humorous vein, which was more sardonic than ever.

'All right, I'll whistle to it,' remarked Mr. Sharples suggestively; 'only, look here: mind ye whistle the same tune—see?'

Mr. Nickens certainly did see. He saw in Mr. Sharples' face a meaning which Mr. Sharples did not care to express less ambiguously. It promised Mr. Nickens that if he attempted to play tricks Mr. Sharples would be disposed to kill and slay him without compunction, and to effect that end in not the softest manner in the world. Which fact understanding, Mr. Nickens lowered at Mr. Sharples as if he had been born to be strangled, and as if Mr. Nickens would have great pleasure in seeing that Nature was not cheated of her just dues.

In his heart each had already committed murder.

CHAPTER IV

DARK DEALINGS, SOME VITUPERATION, AND A MANDATE

WHILE Mr. Nickens and Mr. Sharples were adjusting the honour which exists among thieves, the subject of their conversation, Joe Custer himself, was making his way from Snaresbrook Station to a secluded corner of Epping Forest. The frost in the air gave him every excuse for briskness of motion, though Mr. Custer was never in need of any incentive to keep steadily about his business. 'Stop not, cop not,' said Mr. Custer, whereby he intended it to be understood that if a gentleman of his pursuits kept judiciously on his way he would be less likely to be caught napping.

The appearance of Mr. Custer was that of a man of parts. His interests were universal at whatever pace he walked. All things claimed his notice, and he had an eye for all things. Mr. Custer thus observed many objects which other people passed unperceived, and he invariably saw

other people before they noticed him. In short, Mr. Custer seemed to have been born with one eye on business and the other on the road.

In all other particulars Mr. Custer was equally noteworthy. His figure was square and bony—a fleshy suggestion of anvil and nails. In feature he was anything that observant fancy might happen to suggest. He was probably most frequently set down as a man of small independent means with philanthropic tendencies. His face was filled with mobile wrinkles, which, at his own option, were humorous or solemn, benevolent or severe. Just now they wore the expression of a simple-minded man's enjoyment of a healthy morning walk; and nobody would have suspected his lower jaw to be capable of protruding itself a full eighth of an inch, or his ridged brows to be capable of beetling until the caverns of his eyes became as the dark brooding-places of wild beasts.

At the distance of half a mile from the station Mr. Custer paused to admire a vista of leafless bush and bramble lying open to the wayside. The pause, though brief, was quite long enough to enable Mr. Custer to send a backward glance along the road by which he had travelled, and to derive unhesitating confidence from the outcome of the survey. The forest highway was as empty, broodsomely, and silent as any spirit grove in a

fanciful Deadman's Land ; and Mr. Custer boldly stepped from the wayside into the midst of the bushes which fringed it.

Presently he became lost to view in the woody maze. Erratic clumps of holly, thorn, and beech twisted his path in every kind of indefinite direction ; but the vagaries of the brushwood were evidently familiar and congenial to Mr. Custer, for he pursued the windings of his devious course with unpausing confidence.

Thus steadily he continued for some four hundred yards, and then his movements became uncertain and peculiar. He drew his handkerchief from his overcoat pocket, and almost immediately he seemed to have a fancy that he must have dropped something in so doing. Before he had taken half a dozen strides he was convinced of the fact and promptly retraced his steps. Mr. Custer's body was bent, and his eyes were engrossed with the ground. Nobody could have said that his glance was ever once lifted to flit around the brushwood which had lain behind him when he faced about.

Having found his match-box, Mr. Custer resumed his progress for another twenty yards, which distance brought him to an oak-tree, in which he seemed to find a singular, if passing, interest. He went close to its trunk and examined

it with an eye not less careful than swift. Then he passed leisurely to the further side of the tree, and again disappeared from view.

The curious would have found Mr. Custer in a cave-like growth of holly and bramble ; they would also have discovered that Mr. Custer was not alone, but was face to face with a man whose features were hard to analyze. Their expression was both negative and positive, at some moments disarming suspicion, at others exciting dislike and distrust. There' were even instants when he inspired fear. Perhaps all these impressions were produced by the stranger at will upon the observer. Within four walls he not improbably suggested an ordinary respectable payer of rates and taxes ; but here, in the winter woods, he was invested with an air of mystery. He was slightly above the medium height, and was probably fifty-two years of age, for his close-cropped hair was iron-gray, and gray was repeated in his stiff, trim beard. His most singular feature was his brows. These met each other above the bridge of his nose, and imparted to his eyes a glance so keen and penetrating that its flash, when kindled by certain forces of his mind, seemed to suggest that all attempts to deceive him must be futile.

As Mr. Custer appeared within the bushy
w, the stranger, nonchalantly, and without

disguise, passed a life-preserver into his overcoat pocket, and looked at Mr. Custer in a manner which blended both reception and inquiry.

‘Well?’ he said shortly, in a low tone.

‘Well,’ returned Mr. Custer, not less laconically, and not less cautiously; and he followed the remark with a look which was indicative of his personal readiness.

The ensuing conversation was equally terse.

‘You want money?’ was the inquiry.

‘I rather fancy so,’ responded Mr. Custer with directness.

‘Well?’

Mr. Custer unbuttoned his overcoat, and from an unusually capacious inner pocket produced a small Russia leather case, the spring of which he pressed, so disclosing a pearl collar with an emerald pendant set with brilliants.

‘Good enough for a pony?’ inquired Mr. Custer with suggestiveness.

‘Where from?’ demanded the stranger, placing the suggestion in abeyance.

‘Kingston Hill.’

‘Any tracks?’

‘Not a sniff.’

The stranger examined the dainty prize with an appraising eye.

‘A pony?’ he said carelessly.

‘That’s what I figured it. Reckon you’ll make double,’ observed Mr. Custer dryly.

For reply the stranger closed the case, and presented it to Mr. Custer between the tips of his thumb and fingers.

‘Make double,’ he recommended tersely.

‘I make double?’ queried Mr. Custer, making no attempt to accept the case.

‘Yes, you—if you think it so easy.’

‘Why, what’s the mischief?’

‘I don’t do business on those notions. If there’s double to be got, you get it.’

‘But you’ll get it,’ maintained Mr. Custer with a twisted grin, which was designed to qualify his envy.

‘Perhaps I shall—but you get it. How do we stand if we’re collared?’

‘In the dock,’ grinned Mr. Custer again. ‘After that—the “jug.”’

‘Very well ; and you’ll get two years for the job, and I shall get five years for receiving and for being the worst offender. Doesn’t that risk count for value?’

‘Oh, curse the arguments!’ remarked Mr. Custer impatiently. ‘A pony, I said, didn’t I? Well, let’s have a pony, and square the deal. A bit of a joke doesn’t hurt, does it?’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ the stranger agreed in-

differently ; 'but when I do business I do it on no hints that I am getting the best of the deal. Do I give a good price ?'

Mr. Custer muttered that he had no fault to find in that respect.

'Very well,' continued the stranger. 'If you can get better prices from anyone else, get them.'

'I'm satisfied enough,' protested Mr. Custer shortly. 'You needn't be so infernal touchy. If it's a pony, it's a pony, and I shan't grumble.'

Mr. Custer having thus unreservedly surrendered, the stranger produced a chamois-leather bag, and from its depths counted twenty-five sovereigns into Mr. Custer's extended palm. Not a chink was sounded in the process, and Mr. Custer as noiselessly transferred the coins from his hand to his own pocket. The count being well told, and Mr. Custer being apparently well satisfied, the stranger resumed the conversation.

'What about Friday night?' he asked. 'Did you get my information?'

'I was coming to that,' replied Mr. Custer, a little reflectively. 'I got the thing right enough, but——'

'But what?' inquired the stranger, filling Mr. Custer's pause.

'I've had the blighted luck to lose it,' Mr. Custer blurted out viciously.

The face of the stranger underwent a swift change. He fixed upon Mr. Custer a glance of steady scrutiny, and there was a dangerous gleam in his eye.

‘You lost it?’ he said harshly. ‘How? where?’

‘I’m hanged if I know,’ acknowledged Mr. Custer clumsily. ‘I’ve a notion that I had it safe when I went to Da Costa’s yesterday.’

The stranger had bestowed the case and bag in his pockets, and was now cracking his thumbs and fingers noiselessly by way of giving vent to his boiling wrath.

‘You miserable idiot!’ he rasped contemptuously through his gnashing teeth. ‘If you have lost it at Da Costa’s anything may happen. The haul is done for, but that is not the worst of it. Suppose the screed gets into the hands of a crew smart enough to make it out, but not smart enough to carry it through—what then? What if they get heeled, and the thing is found on them, you bungling fool?’

‘Steady with the lingo! You’re not very choice with it, let me tell you,’ warned Mr. Custer ominously.

‘Steady—steady! you blundering thickhead!’ the stranger muttered through his grinding teeth.

‘Steady! Do you know what you’ve done?’

‘Yes—lost the cursed thing,’ retorted Mr.

Custer with a low snarl. 'But it doesn't follow that all your funky fancies will trip you up.'

'Oh, you think not, eh?' challenged the stranger, with contemptuous spleen. 'Do you know what I know? For five years past, you fool, Scotland Yard has had just such a screed of mine in its possession.'

'Well, and it has never been able to get on the track of the fellow who wrote it. What of that?' suggested Mr. Custer gruffly.

'What of that? Everything, confound you!' returned the stranger, as before. 'That rigmarole was found on the man to whom it was sent, but he was game, and didn't peach. It was shown to the people whose stuff was lifted, but none of them knew my handwriting; so Scotland Yard never got scent of me. But the man to whom Friday's haul belongs does know my handwriting. Now do you see the mischief, you fool?'

Mr. Custer did see it, and he looked his gloomy cognizance of the misfortune.

'For twenty-two years,' continued the stranger ironically, 'I have run a course of marvellous luck, not a little of it being due to my own 'cuteness and skill. Now I am likely to be cornered, all by a clumsy fool who hadn't gumption enough to stick to a scrap of paper.'

'To hear you talk anyone would think you

were already in quod,' grunted Mr. Custer, whom the stranger's revilings roused to grim humour. 'It's nobody's funeral yet.'

'Nobody's funeral, eh?—nobody's funeral, you gape! No, perhaps not; but it ought to be your hanging,' the stranger lashed with scourging jibe.

To give Mr. Custer the credit which was his due, flaunts and jeers of this kind would have been returned to the scorner with sufficient interest in the form of vigour to crack his skull. But Mr. Custer, being a born rogue, was also a born diplomat. There was no wisdom in splitting the head of the best 'fence' in London; for splitting his head, by its putting an end to good prices, was not a process which would pay; and Mr. Custer, recognising this fact, wisely kept a grip upon his itching fingers. He even went out of his way to humour the rage of his reviler.

'Perhaps it ought,' he acknowledged dryly; 'but as soon as I was strung up you'd be the first to want to cut me down. They don't sell Joe Custers thirteen a shilling.'

The stranger did not immediately reply to this sally. He looked at Mr. Custer darkly, and his mind was plainly engaged in debate and calculation. When he spoke the heat of raillery was withdrawn from his tongue, but his tone was not less incisive.

‘Have you been to Da Costa’s?’ he asked abruptly.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Mr. Custer answered. ‘I didn’t miss the thing until just as I was starting to come here.’

The stranger caught Mr. Custer’s eye, and held it with a glance which did not intend Mr. Custer to miss his meaning.

‘Then, do you know what you must do?’ he proceeded significantly. ‘If you don’t find it safe and square at Da Costa’s, you must go to the docks next Friday night.’

‘Well?’ inquired Mr. Custer, in a tone which signified that he had digested that intimation and was ready for any dish that might be intended to follow.

‘Well,’ continued the stranger deliberately, ‘once you are at the docks you don’t come away from them without that paper, or without stopping the lifting of those diamonds. Do you understand? Unless you can get hold of the screed and work the business yourself, the haul is off. You’ll lose five hundred pounds, and serve you right for a careless fool. You must corner yourself somewhere, and if nobody turns up you may fire ahead.’

‘But what if they turn up without the scrawl?’ suggested Mr. Custer with sinister pleasantry. ‘I

am willing to oblige, but I should like to know how I am to close my paws on something they haven't got.'

'In that case,' directed the stranger, 'stop the loot, and see me here the next morning at eleven o'clock.'

'Certainly ; I'll do anything to oblige you,' agreed Mr. Custer with villainous amiability. 'But supposing they won't be stopped? I understand exactly what you mean. It's as clear as the long drop that is waiting for all of us, if we like to make its acquaintance. If they get the sparklers they may be nabbed ; and if they are nabbed, the pen-and-ink masterpiece may be found in one o' their hutches. But supposing they won't be stopped—what then?'

The stranger came close to Mr. Custer, and looked him hard in the face.

'Then—pitch them in the dock,' he said ; and Mr. Custer had no need to swear that he spoke through his teeth.

CHAPTER V

VANISHED JEWELS AND CONJECTURAL SMOKE

A TANTALIZATION is not demolished with the butt-end of an oath, and Mr. Custer, as he made his way back to Snaresbrook Station, muttered and swore in vain. His unsatisfied curiosity exasperated him. Whose were these diamonds that were coming or going in the steamship *East Anglia*? How came 'the best fence in London' to know of their presence there? In especial, how came he to know that the tackler of the task of looting them must look for a packet bearing the mark 'E.A. 999'? How came he to know, moreover, that the 'splits' of Scotland Yard were alert to frustrate any attempt to divert the diamonds from their legitimate destination? And, lastly, how came 'the best fence in London' to have so mortal a dread of things going wrong?

Mr. Custer's ruminations were not accustomed to take a classic form, and his mental questionings

were cast in the mould of the jargon peculiar to rogues. But although his phrases were distinctive, they did not enable him to distinguish the enlightenment of which he was in search, and he continued to freely curse his bafflement. His present quest was as hopeless as had been all his previous endeavours to penetrate the mystery of the information which past billets of 'the best fence in London' had communicated to him. Only one thing he knew—to wit, that he might call 'the best fence in London' by the name of Stephen Elgarth, and that if desperate necessity arose he might seek him at 113, Jewin Crescent, in the commercial purlieu of Cripplegate, E.C.

The misfortune of Mr. Custer in these searchings and speculations was that he was limited by humanity's lack of omniscience. His rendezvous for that night was Da Costa's nondescript saloon—half eating bar, half tavern—in Bevis Marks; and Da Costa's saloon was not the luminous sphere from which to behold the myriad places of the earth. Could Mr. Custer have known that in a quarter so near as Cadogan Terrace, Sloane Street, Chelsea, he could that night have gained some aids to the solution of the problem which tormented him, he might, perhaps, have been a less confounded mortal. But he could not know, and, not knowing, he drank hot rum, and vented hotter

expletives, in the stale, opaque confines of Da Costa's nondescript saloon.

At the other end of the town was Cadogan Terrace and Clifton Mansions. Within Clifton Mansions gleamed the suffusive brilliance of electric light, toned and refined by the soft hues of many delicate colours ; here silks chastely filliped with gossamer lace ; there silks beauteously garnitured with spraying flowers. No footfall sounded upon the floor ; rich carpets caressed the step, and muffled its weight in the silence of velvet pile. Rosewood and silken tapestries, rare vases of fragile Sèvres ware, mirrors clear as crystal, caught up the warm light, and vied in their gleaming with the gilded framings of the pictures that glowed upon the walls. In a corner poised a speeding Mercury in bronze, its clean smoothness of limb half veiled in a bower of palms, white azaleas, and golden orange-trees.

And of all this opulence the Honourable Basil Markham was lord.

To-night the Honourable Basil was entertaining company, and those among his guests who were old enough to remember his early days charitably refrained from recalling them, setting a present excellent dinner in the scale against the weight of his youthful follies and indiscretions. His younger guests took him as they found him, and straight-

way prepared for fresh variations in the next entertainer. But these things in no way changed the trail of his past. The Honourable Basil had been a troublesome wild hawk, constantly involved in unsavoury escapades, and frequently discovered in the company of disreputable associates. To-day he wore the badge of respectability which is allotted to an approved director of public companies ; and, while burying the undesired recollections of other people under the delectable mausoleum of good dinners, he won popular commendation by presenting in his own person the incarnation of fat dividends. Suave in manner, polished in speech, groomed to the point of lustrous freshness, the Honourable Basil was to-night the personification of a perfect host.

The Honourable Mrs. Basil being retired with the ladies to the drawing-room, the Honourable Basil regaled the men of his party with his choicest cigars and his brightest witticisms.

‘A theory, my dear Guston,’ he said, engaging the man who advanced a doubt, ‘is an egg to be hatched. Sit on it long enough, and you will produce something. It’s a matter of closeness and persistence, you know.’

‘No doubt,’ agreed the dubious Mr. Guston ; ‘but I have known a hen to sit for forty days and hatch nothing. That is close enough, isn’t it ?’

‘A little more than close, I should say,’ admitted the Honourable Basil. ‘There was something wrong with the eggs. Exceptions always prove the rule. If your eggs had been sound, my dear Guston, the devotion of your hen would not have been imposed upon for forty days. She would have been clucking and scratching in the company of a brood of cheeping chicks by the end of twenty-two. Now the bearings of this observation lie in the application of it. If your theories are sound, my dear Guston, you will hatch facts. Now, my theory as to the disappearance of Lady Diana’s little collar of pearls and brilliants is that her ladyship was too absorbed in her dinner and too negligent of her pearls. One cannot eat pearls when one is hungry, and her ladyship when she reached Kingston Hill from Yorkshire was possibly starving. If she had been less hungry she would’ve probably have secured her jewel-case, instead of leaving it on her dressing-table. Hunger is naturally careless.’

‘Well,’ objected Guston, ‘hunger may be as careless as you please. But that does not account for the pearls’ disappearance. You don’t suggest that the pearls were ravenous, too, and that they lost themselves on the way to the nearest cook-shop?’

‘Certainly not,’ acknowledged the Honourable

Markham, 'although I have seen it suggested that pearls are alive, and, being alive, might be presumed to grow hungry. My suggestion is that when her ladyship left Norbiton Station, and entered the brougham with her jewel-case in her hand, it was her misfortune to attract the attention of somebody as hungry as herself, only his appetite took the form of a desire for anything which could be turned into cash. If you have followed me closely, you will see my point. It was dark when her ladyship arrived at the station, therefore nothing was easier than keeping the brougham in view without the pursuer making himself conspicuous. The charming Lady Diana had just time to dress for dinner. For that purpose she would need a light in her room, and the light would assist the hungry person in the grounds outside to locate her whereabouts. After that, for a man who could walk up a wall, and pass through a window, the way was easy.'

'A reasonable theory,' approved the company with common consent.

'I am not so sure of that,' observed Guston, who was plainly in an analytical mood.

'Well, what is your explanation?' solicited Mr. Blaberton Greenup, who had hitherto displayed his intellectual profundity judiciously by listening. Mr. Greenup's complexion was fresh,

his eyes were large, and his expression was invariably one of expectant surprise. He was evidently in secret enjoyment of the belief that he had set before Mr. Guston a poser.

‘My explanation!’ repeated Mr. Guston with a shrug, which seemed to suggest that he had a selection of theories at his disposal. ‘Well, my explanation depends upon a consideration of more circumstances than this one case of Lady Diana’s pearls. Perhaps I can best convey my idea in the form of a hint. If you have any jewellery which you regard as unique, or which you consider to be of exceptional value, take precious good care of it, my dear Greenup. There have been far too many disappearances of other people’s baubles lately for my own liking, and I have a notion that if you are going to draw anything in the way of a successful inference, you must begin by theorizing about that subject. Doesn’t it occur to you that in the manner of those disappearances there has been something confoundedly mysterious?’

‘As how?’ inquired Captain Hawley, taking the field in advance of the unready Greenup, who obviously required leisure to wrestle with the problem.

‘Simply enough, Hawley,’ returned Guston, becoming oracular. ‘How many people can you count who have lost their family jewels during

the past year? Can you tick them off on your fingers, do you think?’

‘Scarcely; they are a round score, at least, I should say.’

‘Then, there you have it,’ emphasized Mr. Guston. ‘You don’t know how they have gone; I don’t know how they have gone; but this much, to my mind, is as clear as daylight—somebody in the swim knows the movements of our best jewellery, and knows the easiest way of getting at it.’

‘You are about right there,’ approved the Honourable Basil; ‘and I don’t know that you haven’t forced me to the necessity of revising my own theory.’

Mr. Guston accepted the compliment by helping himself to a fresh cigar, leaning back in his chair, and eyeing the tip of his glowing Havana with complacent satisfaction. The psychological moment had arrived for Mr. Guston to leave to some other man the task of making comments which would serve him as a foundation for a subsequent display of sagacity.

‘Who do you think is the man?’ ventured Mr. Greenup with sapient originality.

‘The man?’ broke in a fourth smoker, who had not yet spoken. ‘My own idea is that Markham and Guston are both out of it. If we could get

at the root of the thing, we should probably find that Guston's mysterious personage is nothing more than a footman with good opportunities, in league with a gang of thieves ; and that Markham's stray customer at Norbiton Station was actually a member of the gang, and was there as a link in an organized system. My own comment on the whole thing is—sit tight on your valuables. Jewellery is evidently their fancy.'

Captain Hawley agreed with suitable brusqueness.

'There is something in that, Potkins, as the enemy said when our howitzer shell hit him in the small of the back,' he approved. 'But there is an alternative theory. A confederate in the house is an old dodge ; but, on the other hand, this may be quite an independent gang, who have become so expert as to reduce jewel robbery to a science.'

'That's so,' agreed Sir Rumball Potkins, who was always ready to be magnanimous after dining. 'It is by no means an improbable solution of the matter.'

'That's solution number four,' observed yet another of the group ; 'and it seems to me that they are all beautifully divergent and contradictory. And possibly none of them hit the mark. If a gang is at work, then, as Hawley

says, they are scientists. They know how to keep a brick wall between themselves and Scotland Yard, at any rate ; and the manner in which they succeed in making the plunder as scarce as themselves is rather more than interesting. So far as I know, not a single snap-spring has ever been traced or recovered.'

'True, O Dick !' smirked Mr. Greenup. 'Why don't you set up as a private detective, and make the name of Markham additionally illustrious ?'

Mr. Greenup was amused with the originality of his humour ; but as nobody entered into the spirit of his pleasantry, he discreetly waned to his normal condition of mediocrity. As for Dick Markham, his eyes kindled, and his face filled with animation ; in which respect he was in strong contrast to his father, the Honourable Basil, who sat with an expression of dual attentiveness impressed upon his face. He was apparently performing the double task of listening to what was being said, and of evolving a possibly accurate explanation of the problem at issue ; but it presently became evident that he was making no satisfactory progress with the effort. He shrugged his shoulders, and changed his position by way of dismissing a futile labour.

'Well,' he observed, 'a certain amount of air-sawing is refreshing, if not exactly profitable. I

think we have put the saw through enough air for one evening. Suppose we join the ladies. One of us may be right ; on the other hand, the whole bunch of us may be wrong ; but, by way of final diversion, I think I can give you a little certainty. You may depend upon this much—they will trip. They all do. It is night and day with rogues, as it is with everybody else ; and you'll find that they will presently come a cropper in the dark. Then you will be able to compare notes, and see who was nearest the mark. Meanwhile, gentlemen, don't theorize, but keep the weather eye open. If Guston is right, it was a great mistake of Sir George Rowley to mention his expectation of some particularly choice diamonds from the Cape next Friday. That comes of being interested in the price of diamonds, and especially in the chance of losing them. A club-room is not the best place in the world for talking of these things, especially if your voice is not of the lowest ; and, unfortunately, Rowley's voice is something in the nature of a human trumpet. He can't help that, of course ; but I hope he will receive his diamonds all right.'

'I'll wager you he doesn't !' exclaimed Guston with sportive alacrity.

'Why?' asked the Honourable Basil curiously.

'I don't know—freakishness, I suppose. Some-

how, I have a sudden fancy that he'll not get them. What do you say?' proposed Guston again.

But Mr. Guston's wagering spirit was not destined to be immediately gratified.

A hoarse bellowing soared up from the street without, and broke into the warmth and glow of the room—'Orrible murder in Aldgate—paper—speshul! *Evening Times*—murder—paper!'

'Would you like to know what the news is, gentlemen?' inquired the Honourable Basil, in the exercise of his courtesy as host.

'Ah, we might as well,' responded Mr. Guston promptly. 'It would be rather curious if this should prove to be one of the gang tripping.'

The Honourable Basil pressed the electric button, and directed the footman who responded to the summons to obtain a copy of the paper being shouted below. When the man returned, he handed to the Honourable Basil a sheet already open at the interesting page, and the headlines upon which the Honourable Basil's guests concentrated their collective gaze stood out in letters of acute black:

'ALDGATE TRAGEDY.

'MAN FOUND WITH HIS SKULL FRACTURED
IN BEVIS MARKS.'

'Who was the miserable beggar?' inquired Guston; and he forthwith began reading with

energy. 'Ah! Joe Custer—recognised as one of the cleverest and best-dressed thieves in London, also one of the best educated; long been wanted, but has managed to baffle the police and throw 'em off his trail for years.'

'Pah! some East End ruffian,' said the Honourable Basil impatiently. 'Let us join the ladies.'

CHAPTER VI

AN ORCHID, SOME DIAMONDS, AND A LITTLE LOVE

A fool to good purpose sometimes speaks, and the effect of Mr. Greenup's callow humour had been to set Richard Markham upon a curious trend of thought. He began with an emphatic proposition. It should be possible for the filchers of society's jewels to be discovered; and, being discovered, it should also be possible for them to be caught. The question which remained was, Who should be able to catch them? The more he considered the more he became fascinated with the scintillating facets of the subject.

'I didn't know that Papa Rowley was expecting diamonds from the Cape,' he mused, his ear being deaf meanwhile to the music of '*Cavalleria Rusticana*'; 'I wonder whether Cissie knows anything about it. I've a good mind to ask her—'gad, I have not a good mind—I will.'

The aria ceased, and Markham made his way

towards a pretty girl, whose bright eyes sparkled at his approach.

‘That was very nicely sung, Miss Rowley, wasn’t it?’ he said lightly, as he seated himself by her side.

She looked at him quizzically.

‘Sung?’ she laughed. ‘Where did you hear the singing? It was played.’

‘Oh, played, was it!’ he accepted. ‘Well, it’s much the same thing. When it isn’t being sung it’s being played, and when it isn’t being played it’s being sung. There is some excuse for not knowing where you are.’

She laughed again.

‘You are in a waggish mood this evening,’ she said, a little slyly.

‘Do you think so?’ he submitted. ‘If I am, I don’t feel like it. In fact, I was thinking that I had rather a serious bent. Have you seen the new orchid?’ he added, as if his thoughts were moving spasmodically. ‘It only came to-day. We are sending it down to Melworth to-morrow; this is not a good place for it here. I will show it to you, if Lady Rowley will let me have the pleasure.’

Lady Rowley was not too engrossed with her neighbour to catch the sound of her name; she turned, graciously showing two rows of teeth,

which was intended to be a complaisant smile.

‘The orchid, did you say, Mr. Markham?’ She gleamed again, this time with favouring amiability. ‘Certainly ; Cicely, I am sure, will be very pleased to see it. I am immensely fond of orchids, too ; and presently you shall show this one to me, if you will.’

Markham replied that nothing would give him greater pleasure, and he promptly escorted Miss Rowley to the glass-house which the Honourable Basil had reared for his æsthetic pleasure over the portico which gave admittance to his mansion. The orchid was a rare bloom, and Markham expatiated upon its points of excellence ; but he had less interest in the exotic than in his own impatience for another outbreak of music.

‘Bother it ! Why don’t they play something?’ he politely growled, with humorously modulated disgust.

‘Why ?’ Miss Rowley asked artlessly.

‘Because I have something I want to say to you, and I can say it better with a musical accompaniment,’ he announced candidly. ‘Don’t you think I am an abominable fraud to get you here like this ? I should have liked to show you the flower, of course ; but that was only my idea for getting you alone.’

Miss Rowley drooped her eyes, and looked very bewitching.

‘I cannot say what I think,’ she rejoined ; and then, as if to gratify the whim of Markham, the music began.

‘Ah!’ he said, in a louder tone, ‘now I can speak freely. You will scarcely guess why I have contrived to get you here alone for a few minutes, but I will come to the reason at once. Did you know that Sir George was expecting some diamonds from the Cape next Friday?’

‘Yes,’ replied Cicely, with a little breath of relief ; ‘but I did not know it from my father. My mother told me—she is not very good at keeping a secret, you know,’ she added, smiling a little apologetically.

‘Hum!’ mused Markham, as if the fact of her ladyship’s inability to keep a secret was one which scarcely needed demonstration. ‘Then, it was a secret, was it?’

‘Yes ; he intends the stones to be mounted in a tiara, as a present for my next birthday,’ divulged Miss Cicely, her eyes brightening with anticipation.

‘Then,’ said Markham emphatically, ‘I am all the more pleased that I have thought to speak to you about them. Do you know what Sir George has done to insure their safe delivery? You

know, there has been an amazing lot of clever jewel robberies lately ; and it is necessary to take more than ordinary precautions in order to avoid losing one's jewellery, especially if it is of any fame, or of great value. We were speaking of these robberies in the smoking-room just now, and it was the mention of Sir George's expected diamonds that made me resolve to speak to you about them.'

'But you don't think they are threatened, do you?' Miss Cicely asked anxiously.

'There is no telling ; and it is when one cannot tell that one needs to be extra careful,' remarked Markham astutely. 'Where do they arrive?'

'At the East India Dock, by the *East Anglia*.'

'Do you know at what time she is expected to be berthed in dock?'

'That is a little uncertain, it seems. If it is dark when she reaches Gravesend on Friday she may lie there the night, and come up on the morning tide. On the other hand, she may get into the docks just before dark, in which case the diamonds will be kept on board until Saturday morning.'

'Hum!' mused Markham again. 'It is a pity there cannot be a little more certainty. But that reminds me, we are forgetting Sir George. What has he done to safeguard them?'

'He has informed Scotland Yard that he is expecting them, and I believe that an officer will

watch the arrival of the ship, keeping an eye open for suspicious characters. My mother tells me that the stones are coming in the personal charge of the captain, and that my father proposes to go to the dock for them himself.'

'Then,' observed Markham thoughtfully, 'he is wise in resolving to go by daylight. The gentry who fly at such high game as diamonds are not particular what they do to prevent themselves from being cheated of their booty. You had better advise Lady Rowley to persuade Sir George to go in his own carriage. It is not at all an uncommon trick for crack thieves to have a cabman acting with them—one of their own gang, of course. He picks up the victim, and, taking prearranged byways as an excuse for a short-cut, drives the unfortunate wretch right into the den in which the gang is waiting for him. I should be grieved to see Sir George knocked on the head,' he concluded genuinely.

Markham had opened a whole vista of possible tragedies to the mental vision of Cicely Rowley, and she looked at him in vague alarm. He returned her gaze, and a magnetic thread was spun between them, drawing them subtly to each other.

'I am afraid I have frightened you,' he said gently. 'I did not mean to do that,' he added, and again he looked at her intently.

There was something more than steadiness in Markham's gaze. Cicely had before seen the same light kindling in it ; but this was the first time that she had confronted its full gleam alone, and the force of it disconcerted her. She evaded its steadfastness by looking down. Markham glanced at the rearward room, and a little impulsively he took her hand.

'Cicely,' he said softly, 'you know what I need not say. May I buy you a birthday present of my own, and anticipate the event?'

'Is that why you brought me here?' she inquired, a little slyly. She did not lift her glance. Woman-like, she toyed with her fan, and was not a little coy. Her reticence enhanced her modesty, sweetened her shyness, and heightened her charm. It was a battery of feminine graces before which Markham was unable to stand. He flung method aside recklessly, and replied with a full discharge of the truth.

'Yes, Cicely,' he acknowledged ; 'but I was concerned about the diamonds, and I thought I would dispose of them first.'

'Then you were really serious in what you said?' she queried, giving him a glance.

He smiled with a little audacity. 'I should have jumped straight from the orchid to—this, if diamonds hadn't obstructed,' he said frankly.

‘You are ——’ She paused.

‘Well?’ he invited, with a quiz.

‘You are a shocking rogue,’ she smiled, as if in spite of herself.

‘But you wouldn’t have preferred the rogue to be someone else, eh?’ he quizzed again.

He was storming the reserve of her womanhood, and she blushed prettily.

‘Perhaps I ought not to tell you,’ she replied, a little demurely.

‘Perhaps there is no need,’ he retorted, laughing.

‘And if there isn’t—what then?’ she challenged him a little archly.

‘What then, Cissie?’ he laughed again. ‘Why, that;’ and, drawing her close to him, he kissed her on her lips. ‘I knew I might do it, Cissie,’ he added.

She was vanquished, and she yielded unservedly. ‘You did, Dick—how?’ she asked.

‘Shall I tell you?’ he smiled cunningly.

She nodded. The music rose and fell. His spirits were buoyant, his ardour quietly bold.

‘Well,’ he said brightly, ‘you would not have been so ready to come if you had not been willing. Did you guess the risk you ran?’

She was in his arms, and somehow another nod seemed to harmonize most pleasantly with the situation.

‘How did you know?’ he playfully pressed.

‘From many things, mostly past,’ she confessed readily.

‘That means that it has been growing on us,’ he commented. ‘I have thought a great deal of you lately, Cissie. I suppose you have known that too?’

‘Yes, I suppose I have, because I have thought a great deal about you as well.’

‘Cissie?’

She looked up at him, her eyes lustrous, her lips smiling. This was her first experience of wooing. Not that she had never before been asked to marry, but heretofore she had not loved. He looked into her eyes a space without speaking; her blood warmed, and her limbs thrilled. Then he spoke softly :

‘Is it wife, Cissie?’

‘Yes, Dick,’ she answered.

And so one more pair of enthusiasts conceived themselves in paradise, and did not dream that, like young bears, they had all their troubles before them.

CHAPTER VII

BLACK-VISAGED MURDER

MR. BILL SHARPLES, when he found himself again in the Mile End Road, was by no means pleased and satisfied with his allotment in the cosmic system. Both Mr. Samuel Nickens and Mr. Joe Custer occupied a too preponderating share in his sphere of interest for his own liking. He suspected Mr. Nickens, and he had an uneasy feeling that he had assented much too simply to Mr. Nickens's proposals. Mr. Custer he regarded as an obstructionist who had worked him personal mischief. His sentiments towards that worthy were those of malevolent hostility ; and the knowledge that Mr. Custer was the possessor of the superior favour of fortune, and of the greater personal advantages, was the chief reason for Mr. Sharples hating him with all the more intensity.

There was only one sedative for this state of humour. Mr. Sharples entered the first tavern that presented itself invitingly upon his homeward way,

and ordered gin—gin stiff, gin hot. He crushed the alcoholized sugar in the glass, and drained the steaming spirit at a gulp. He felt a warm glow of elation imparting vitality to his former cold savageness, and he spent another twopence of Mr. Nickens's honest half-crown. The second dose was pleasant and soothing, and Mr. Sharples permitted himself to test the merits of a third. Sedatives in moderation are efficacious, but sedatives in excess become irritants; and when Mr. Sharples left the ministrations of the Circe who had attended to his spirituous wants his sensibilities were acrid and aggressive.

The circumstance boded ill for Peggy Sharples' comfort. When Mr. Sharples returned to the rookery by the Minories the half-crown of Mr. Nickens had become reduced to eighteenpence; Mr. Sharples himself had become thick in speech, and his manner had developed a black sullenness.

He signalized his entry by kicking over the sack which contained the indescribable harvest of Mother Sharples' morning picking. A bottle of gin, which had been concealed behind it, toppled over upon the foul floor, and Mother Sharples grabbed it with slavish frenzy.

'You scab!' she screeched tipsily. 'It's mine, Can't I 'ave a drop o' nuthin' without your

nosin' into it? Ye shan't 'ave it!' she shrieked horribly; 'it's mine, I tell ye—mine!'

The 'scab' lurched across the room, seized the neck of the inebriated creature's filthy bodice, and twisted it until the shrill spite in her throat was choked. She turned the bottle in her bony claws, and, holding it by its neck, she raised it club-wise to smash it in his face.

'Would ye!' he growled, ferociously; and with a quick jerk and a twist he flung her at full length upon the floor, where she kicked and spat at him in maniacal fury. With another lurch he swooped downward, and wrenched the bottle from her hugging arms.

'Stow your yellin', d'ye hear?' he threatened. 'Stow it, or I'll empty the 'ole lot over ye!' and, suiting the action to the word, Mr. Sharples withdrew the cork from the bottle.

Mother Sharples heard the threat less than she comprehended the action; and, being partially sobered by Mr. Sharples' peculiar form of filial usage, she sat up in trembling eagerness.

'Hey, honey,' she cackled craftily, 'you wouldn't do the old woman out of her little drop o' lotion?'

Mr. Sharples seemed to have a vague idea swimming in his fuddled brain. He grasped the bottle by its neck, swaying unsteadily as he stood,

and alternately stared in rumination at the liquor and at Mother Sharples squatting on the floor. Finally he looked behind him for the woebegone chair of the den, and finding it conveniently placed, he flopped into it.

‘D’ye hear?’ he growled, as if he had already repeated the demand, ‘where did ye get it? No gammon. Where did ye get it?’

Mother Sharples blinked at him cunningly. Her fingers itched for the bottle; her brain, though vengeful, prompted a sacrifice.

‘Save me ’alf of it, and I’ll tell ye,’ she cozened.

‘Out with it first, then, or I’ll swill the lot,’ he threatened roughly.

‘No, don’t, Billy,’ she wheedled artfully; ‘take what ye want, and I’ll tell ye.’

‘Yes, I know,’ retorted Mr. Sharples with drunken deliberateness, preparing to lift the bottle to his mouth. ‘Are ye goin’ to, or ain’t ye?’

‘Yes, I’m goin’ to; only how do I know you’ll not sell me when I’ve done?’ she mumbled ill-usedly.

‘And how do I know you’ll tell me if I let ye have it?’ he snarled in repulse.

‘I will, Billy—straight, I will,’ she protested, in a coaxing tone, but with watchful eye. ‘Sides, ye’ve made me mortal dry.’

This argument seemed to appeal to Mr. Sharples, for, having agonized Mother Sharples with apprehension by swilling himself with the bottle, he reached out a swaying arm, and finally grabbed a grimy cup from the mantelpiece. He poured into it as much of the spirit as he considered Mother Sharples deserved, and handed it to her with ruffianly concession.

‘Ere, choke yerself,’ he blurted coarsely. ‘Whether ye get any more depends on what ye say, and how ye say it.’

Mother Sharples clutched the cup eagerly, and drained the dram with a breath of thankfulness.

‘Now then,’ renewed Mr. Sharples roughly, ‘how did ye get the money for it?’

‘Had it give to me,’ retorted Mother Sharples between relishing smacks of her gums.

‘Had it give to ye—where?’

‘Here.’

‘Give to ye here? Who by?’

‘Dunno. He was some cove after the paper. Most perlite he was.’

Mr. Sharples craned his neck and glared at Mother Sharples with bleary, threatening eyes. He raised the bottle by its neck, the gin gurgled forth in a wasteful stream, and Mother Sharples burst into a screech of evil spite and of anguished consternation.

‘Look, ye fool!’ she squealed. ‘Oh, my eyes, look at it!’

‘What d’ye mean?’ bellowed Mr. Sharples furiously a second time. ‘Did ye tell him you’d got it?’

‘Tell him I’d got it, ye fool!’ snapped Mother Sharples viciously. ‘No, of course I didn’t. You’ve gone a bit daft, haven’t ye? Ye needn’t stare the inside out o’ me like that.’

Permitting himself to be mollified, Mr. Sharples demanded to know what the visitor had been like; and from Mother Sharples’ description of his appearance he had no doubt that Mr. Joe Custer had honoured the rookery with his presence.

‘What time did he come?’ he demanded, giving Mother Sharples another rueful twinge by taking an incidental gulp at the bottle.

‘About two o’clock,’ she snapped again. ‘I let him turn over the sack, and he give me three bob.’

‘Oh, he give ye three bob, did he?’ commented Mr. Sharples with ugly pleasantry. ‘D’ye think I’m fool enough to believe he give ye that because he couldn’t find what he wanted?’

Mother Sharples blinked her rheumy eyes till they filled with furtive cunning.

‘He thought there was p’raps a chance of my daughter havin’ it,’ she sniggered. ‘I let him

think she'd been pickin' over the sack, but was gone out. I'm to have another three bob, if she's got it when she comes back ; and I'm to let him have it up Dook's Court, in Bevis Marks, at half-past four. Have ye got it with ye ?'

Mr. Sharples vented a sounding oath.

'Got it ?' he grinned, showing his teeth. 'Yes, I've got it. But there's more than three bob in this game. You leave this to me. How did he know where to find ye ?'

'Da Costa's knife-boy put him in the way of it. He knows I come from this street, but he couldn't give the number, 'cos he didn't know it. The cove himself has got a fancy that the paper might have been swept up with the rubbish and shoved into the bin. That's why he come here to hunt for it,' amplified Mother Sharples with mischievous relish.

'Half-past four, did ye say ?' asked Mr. Sharples with sinister interest.

'Yes ; he said it'd just about be gettin' dark then.'

'So it will, Mrs. Sharples—so it will,' Mr. Sharples agreed with an evilly drunken chuckle.

Mother Sharples eyed him suspiciously. 'What's the game ye're up to ?' she asked, as a vague apprehension penetrated her gin-bemused brain.

'Never ye mind what the game is,' scowled Mr.

Sharples. 'Just ye remember that I ain't been home since mornin'. That's all ye've wanted to do.'

Then, in a preposterous fit of generosity, Mr. Sharples flung the gin-bottle into Mother Sharples' lap, and, lurching from his chair, flung himself out of the room.

Mother Sharples was too engrossed with the remaining contents of the bottle to take any further interest in Mr. Sharples, who reeled to a cupboard under the ramshackle stairs of the tenement, and took therefrom an object of weight and substance, which he bestowed in the suspiciously deep inner pocket of his coat. This done, Mr. Sharples, with his face set in a drunken scowl, shambled from the house.

Apparently his objective was the nearest public-house, for he was presently drinking more gin, stiff and hot as before. Mr. Sharples' capacity for consuming gin hot was amazing. Within half an hour, at three different taverns, Mr. Nickens's genuine half-crown was further reduced to one shilling.

And in all this demonstration of bibulous power Mr. Sharples moved casually, yet steadily, towards Bevis Marks.

If Mr. Sharples had been in search of spirituous courage he could not have been more steadfast in

his quest. The fumes of the gin seemed to have a downward tendency, and to affect his legs rather than his head ; for, although his eyes were bleary and he muttered fierce and incoherent threats at a whole league of invisible offenders, he yet contrived to observe the passing of time.

At a quarter-past four o'clock he entered the narrow confines of Bevis Marks. His face was set in a black scowl, his eyes were filled with a fierce blaze. In his brain flamed the dementia of drink. If he lurched he spilt none of his brutish cunning. He brushed the corner of Duke's Court with his erratic body, and turned viciously into its dim passage. Then he steadied himself in an open doorway, and seemed to drift into maudlin contemplation of nothing in particular.

Presently came the sound of footsteps, and Bill Sharples stalked from the doorway into the alley in the manner of one just issuing from the house. As he passed the newcomer he flung out his left arm with a backward sweep, and brushed the man's hat from his head. In his right hand he gripped a jemmy. With a ferocious swing he brought it down upon the stranger's skull, and, as the victim reeled to his fall, he delivered a second fearful blow at his upturned temple.

The day was set for Joseph Custer. In his reckless, drunken audacity Bill Sharples had

accomplished a deed which, to soberness, would have been impossible ; for soberness would have lacked the requisite recklessness and the necessary daring to accept the hazard.

Murder was done in the early dusk of the day's afternoon, while the city's tide of business was still flowing ; and Bill Sharples, with his weapon returned to his pocket, staggered in a manner in nowise distinguishable from the gait of the ordinary drunkard of the streets, across Houndsditch, into the area of the Ghetto, and so onward through Spitalfields, and the labyrinths beyond, to St. Peter's Street, Mile End.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME BROTHERLY AND SISTERLY HUMOURS, BLENDED WITH A FEW IDEAS

THE Honourable Basil Markham, when he wakened to the uncertain courses of another day, seemed to have derived but little refreshment from the social entertainment of the preceding evening. His humour was moody, his spirits were dull, and he was without an edge to his appetite. He seemed to be altogether in the state of a man with the vapours, and he early found an excuse for leaving the breakfast-table.

Mr. Richard, on the other hand, had every appearance of having made a breakfast of larks.

‘Read the murder, Nibs?’ he asked cheerfully, as he spread himself in an easy-chair, with his feet to the fire.

Nibs was Miss Nellie Markham, and Mr. Richard, for the sake of familiar brevity, consistently condensed her name to this convenient form.

'Goodness me, no!' exclaimed Miss Nibs. 'Why should I read murders?'

'I don't see why you should, come to think of it,' agreed Mr. Richard sagely. 'But people do do queer things, you know. Here were you and Bob Leslie eating Neapolitan ices together at twelve o'clock last night, enough to kill a pair of gorillas.'

'You wretch! that's downright slander,' cried Miss Nibs indignantly.

'No, it isn't, Nibs,' he retorted easily; 'it's a certificate to the toughness of both your constitutions.'

For this sally Mr. Richard had his hair ruffled. He received the treatment in the manner of a nabob taking a shampooing.

'You deserve to be slain yourself,' declared Miss Nibs, blushing hotly.

'Well,' he returned coolly, 'which is the worst—a queer taste for murder, by reading in print, or trying to commit suicide by means of ices? I consider the former the more respectable.'

'Respectable!' echoed Miss Nibs disdainfully; 'you are too lazy to be respectable.'

'That's all you know, Nibs,' he rejoined airily. 'You don't know what I can do when I try.'

'When you try!' commented Miss Nibs, as before.

‘Yes,’ pursued Mr. Richard, ‘when I try. I believe I could clear up this murder if I tried. And it’s a queer murder, too. What do you think of that, Miss Icicle?’

‘I think Cicely Rowley has added a ton to your self-conceit,’ remarked Miss Nibs positively.

‘Oh! all right, Nibs,’ he ejaculated. ‘If you think that, blessed if I don’t have a shot at astonishing you and the natives. But anyway, what do you know about Cicely Rowley?’

‘Well, Dickie, you know,’ she rejoined sweetly, ‘Neapolitan ices don’t interfere with my eyesight.’

‘No; you don’t say so!’ he said in surprise. ‘I should have thought from the way that you and Leslie congealed to each other that your eyes were frozen hard enough for a skating-rink. But now your eyes are open, look here, Nibs. Guess what I was talking to Cissie Rowley about.’

‘Cissie, eh?’ she quizzed. ‘That sounds very familiar, doesn’t it?’

‘Perhaps it does, Nibs,’ he laughed knowingly.

‘But I hadn’t time to explain things last night.’

‘That was obvious,’ she observed slyly.

‘Well, I am glad of that; it will save time now,’ he remarked comfortably. ‘Are you going to try to guess?’

‘Perhaps I had better not,’ she quizzed again.

‘It will save time.’

Miss Nibs flattered herself that she was turning the tables.

‘So it will,’ he agreed approbatively. ‘Well, then, here goes. Do you think you can keep a secret, Nibs?’

‘I can try,’ retorted Miss Nibs loftily.

‘If you try hard, I dare say you will manage it,’ Mr. Richard encouraged. ‘Well, Sir George Rowley has some diamonds coming from the Cape. They are a birthday present to Cicely, but she is not supposed to know anything about them, and you must, therefore, keep what I am telling you strictly to yourself. Cicely wouldn’t have known of it if Mamma Rowley had not told her.’

‘Well, why are you telling me?’ queried Miss Nibs, not unnaturally, and with pertinent logic.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ Mr. Richard pondered. ‘It’s because I am as bad as Mamma Rowley herself, I suppose. Anyway, you’re not a bad sort, Nibs, and deserve an occasional tit-bit,’ he concluded with condescension.

‘Thanks,’ she returned dryly.

‘Well,’ he continued, ‘having let the cat out of the bag, I shouldn’t like Sir George to have his intended surprise for Cicely, as he imagines it, to be spoiled. Not that he hasn’t mentioned the diamonds himself; but that was at his club, and he spoke of expecting them only as a business

matter, and not in relation to Cicely. Nobody is supposed to know anything of that except himself and Lady Rowley ; so, you see, you and I are the only others to share the secret.'

'Oh,' commented Miss Nibs facetiously ; 'I thought you were conveying me a delicate hint to congratulate—er—Cissie, in a—sisterly way.'

'Lord, no, Nibs!' he retorted ; 'when I have to congratulate Leslie will be quite soon enough. But to come to the point, it is this : We were speaking of the recent jewel robberies after dinner last night, and in the end Sir George's expected diamonds from the Cape were mentioned. That is how I first came to hear of them. Guston, having regard to the robberies, offered to wager that Sir George would never see the sparkle of them ; and—well, you know, having a friendly interest in Cicely, I thought I would ask her what steps Sir George had taken to insure their safe delivery. The captain of the ship is bringing the stones, and Scotland Yard has been informed that they are coming ; but as Scotland Yard has yet to shine in the matter of these robberies, the mere fact of Scotland Yard having been informed may not be the most perfect safeguard in the world. Now, Nibs, if you were, say, a gentleman with a friendly interest in Miss Cissie, and, therefore, particularly desirous that she should receive her

diamonds safely, what would you do—that is, if you had conceived the idea that you might possibly be of service?’

‘But is it certain that the diamonds are in any danger?’ inquired Miss Nibs, falling in with Mr. Richard’s new vein of seriousness.

‘Guston thinks they are,’ he replied. ‘He has a notion that if these robberies could be traced they would be found to be instigated and directed by somebody moving in our set, and, therefore, having cognizance of the jewels worth having, and of the best way of taking them. The pater himself was of opinion that Sir George had been unwise in mentioning the diamonds at the club.’

Miss Nibs looked at Mr. Richard whimsically. ‘And you are good enough to pay me the compliment of suggesting that my wits are equal to giving advice,’ she said, with effective banter. ‘I thought you were equal to anything—when you tried—from unriddling murder mysteries upwards.’

‘That’s all right, Nibs,’ Mr. Richard rejoined magnanimously. ‘You’re not half a bad sort, and have a pretty little ingenious head of your own. I am not without a notion or two, but I recognise that two heads are better than one.’

'You don't mean to say so!' remarked Miss Nibs in astonishment. 'Well, your conversation with Miss Cissie seems to have done you some little good, at any rate. Now, I suppose, you want my suggestions—for your joint benefit?'

'That's it, Nibs; "suggestions" is the word,' endorsed Mr. Richard complacently.

'Well,' considered Miss Nibs, 'if I were particularly anxious to overlook the safety of those diamonds, I should cut through France and Spain, and join the ship at Madeira. Then I should prove my credentials to the captain, as—ahem!—Miss Cissie's *fiancé*, and should constitute myself his special bodyguard until the diamonds were safely delivered to my—er—prospective father-in-law.'

'Dash it! that's an idea—a good idea,' approved Mr. Richard unstintedly. But a moment later he reluctantly shook his head. 'No,' he mused, 'it couldn't be done; this is Wednesday morning, and the ship is due on Friday.'

'Where?' asked Miss Nibs practically.

'At the East India Dock.'

'Then, why not get the permit of the owners to board her at Gravesend?'

'That's not a bad idea, either,' he commended; 'but my name isn't Rowley, and the owners might be suspicious of the genuineness of my intentions.'

You see, I have not spoken to Sir George about anything yet, and if I were to seek his authority to carry out the plan he might consider it peculiar. And, after all, this is all a little interlude of my own, based upon the supposition that there is a possibility of the diamonds going astray, and prompted by my desire to test my impression that I am fairly well endowed with the detective instinct. It's good sport, but I shouldn't have thought of it if it hadn't been for Greenup.'

'Greenup?' queried Miss Nibs, with difficulty of belief. 'You don't mean to say he made a suggestion, do you?'

'He did, Nibs; and that's a fact. A little startling, isn't it? On some remark of mine, he suggested that I should set up as a private detective, and run the thieves to earth. And, 'pon my word, I believe it can be done.'

'As easily as unravelling the murder, eh?' laughed Miss Nibs, baiting him adroitly.

'By George!' exclaimed Mr. Richard, with inspiration, 'there may be more in that than meets the eye, as the milkman said to the milk when he had finished with the pump.' He seized the morning paper, and glanced at the report of Custer's murder again. 'Well dressed, well educated; recognised as Joe Custer, one of the most expert jewel thieves in the Metropolis.

Crime attributed to revenge,' he scanned hastily. 'Jove! I have a presentiment that there may be something to be picked up here. Blessed if I won't see Willis, of the *Courier*—I know him—and get him to let me do a little ferreting for his columns.'

'Going to turn reporter?' said Miss Nibs, in amazement.

'That depends,' said Mr. Richard magnificently. 'But why not? Reporters are said to be first-rate detectives. When they begin inquiring into a crime they can't help beginning to theorize; and I am told the soundness of their theories is generally proved by events. Anyway, they have the opportunity of getting nearer to things than anybody else, except the police; and if I can't do what I want to do without being a reporter—well, then, I'll report.'

'Well!' Miss Nibs exclaimed, aghast; 'if you haven't assurance enough for—anything!'

'Think so, Nibs?' he said amusedly. 'Well, we'll see what we can make of it. Only keep it quiet, you know. I don't want the pater to know anything about it. And, for that matter, I don't want Sir George to know anything about it either. I don't suppose he would thank me if he did. I don't want to offend him, you know, Nibs.'

‘No, of course not,’ agreed Miss Nibs, with sweet significance.

‘As things are, I should prefer it the other way about,’ he observed, as if in general candour. ‘Unfortunately, Sir George doesn’t seem to be at all partial to the pater, and it may be desirable to find a way to his good graces. I verily believe that he couldn’t get away from his engagements last night solely because he wanted a good excuse for not coming here. But we shall see what we shall see, Nibs. Meanwhile, I shall take a plebeian bus as far as Bevis Marks—just for curiosity’s sake, Nibs, if you have no objection.’

‘If I have no objection!’ remarked Miss Nibs, laughing lightly. ‘Well, I fancy that if you had to go to Bevis Marks every day for thirty shillings a week, you would wish Bevis Marks at Halifax.’

‘No doubt, my dear,’ agreed Mr. Richard readily; ‘but, as I haven’t, there’s a possibility of my finding it of quite new and romantic interest.’

Half an hour later Richard Markham was on his way to Bevis Marks.

CHAPTER IX

OVER THE SPILLING OF BLOOD

By the time Mr. Sharples reached St. Peter's Street much of the mental inflammation which his orgies had kindled was subdued, but he was still not a little bemused. Of the latter fact, through the action of some gin-proof matter of his brain, Mr. Sharples himself was aware.

'Bill Sharples,' he muttered, 'ye're screwed; and if ye go in like this he'll see ye're screwed, and 'll smell rats. Ye'd better sling yerself together, and shove the "jim" down a sink. No ye don't, though. Sammy Nickens is tough, and ye don't know how he'll take it. Maybe he'll cut up rough, and call ye a blitherin' idiot, and ye mayn't like it, and ye may need this thing here.'

He grinned sourly, and took a turn up the street, for further consideration.

'He's got to be stopped from goin' to Da Costa's, that's certain,' he muttered again. 'That won't pay nohow. If he goes there knowin'

nuthin', there's odds on him bein' pinched, and that'll queer the lay for Friday. And it ain't unlikely that what he might say would do for me. No, thank ye, Sammy Nickens; no Da Costa's for me. 'Tain't good enough, under the circs—not near good enough.'

At the end of the street Mr. Sharples wheeled round, and retraced his uneven steps towards the house which Mr. Nickens could not, by any stretching of the imagination, be said to adorn. As he approached it two figures emerged from the area steps, and Mr. Sharples recognised Mrs. Nickens, accompanied by her satellite, the imp. From the basket which bulged from her arm Mr. Sharples inferred an expedition in quest of domestic supplies, the imp attending in view of the not improbable contingency of Mrs. Nickens herself becoming in need of a convoy.

'Now's your time, Toughie,' chuckled Mr. Sharples, as Mrs. Nickens went towards the Mile End Road. 'And, all things considered, it's a good job ye kep' this here.'

Mr. Sharples placed his hand in his pocket, to satisfy himself that the jemmy, which had already done deadly service, was so lodged as to be capable of swift withdrawal for instant use. Then he shuffled down the area steps, and knocked at the lower door as he had done before. He was not

long kept waiting. In a few moments a light glowed through the glass panels of the door. Then came darkness, as if the person within had been descending the stairs, but, not hearing the knock, had passed into the kitchen at the rear, and had darkened the passage by closing the kitchen door. Mr. Sharples, understanding the manoeuvre, knew that Mr. Nickens was standing in darkness behind the area door, waiting for the formal sign. Accordingly, he scratched with his finger-nail three times on the ground-glass panel which was over the lock, and having been answered with a quiet scratch from within, he was presently admitted, and conducted to the kitchen.

Sociably, Mr. Sharples' greeting was not all that he could have desired.

'You're back again!' growled Mr. Nickens, by way of attaching his own label to the obvious. 'What for?'

'Yes, Sammy, back again,' rejoined Mr. Sharples, grinning as if he had brought with him satanic humours which should make his reappearance pleasant. 'Ain't ye pleased?'

Mr. Nickens ignored the question. Much to his surprise, Mr. Sharples found Mr. Nickens's thumbs and fingers gripping his throat, and himself flung against the kitchen wall.

'Now, you dog,' Mr. Nickens hissed with

superlative viciousness, 'you're drunk! Do ye think I am going to have myself juggled by you? Hey, do ye?' And Mr. Nickens dug his thumbs and fingers into Mr. Sharples' throat to such good purpose that the return of Mr. Sharples to soberness was greatly expedited thereby. 'I'll teach you to come blundering here and giving the 'tects pointers to me,' added Mr. Nickens; and by way of emphasizing this pleasant threat he flung Mr. Sharples' chin upward towards the ceiling; and, with a kick of his foot in one direction, and the jerk of his arms in another directly opposite, he toppled Mr. Sharples with rough and pleasing lack of ceremony into a hard-backed chair, against which the spinal column of Mr. Sharples cracked with a thoroughness which seemed calculated to guarantee his further quick recovery.

Mr. Sharples spluttered and gasped in a manner which apparently gave Mr. Nickens intense satisfaction; for, while Mr. Sharples mopped and mowed, he stood eyeing him in readiness to give him the benefit of a second dose of the same enjoyable exercise if he should show any signs of needing it.

'Now, ye scrag, what d'ye mean by it?' he demanded, when Mr. Sharples had ceased to give evidence of his intention to choke.

Mr. Sharples scowled upward from under his

knitted brows, and his hand instinctively wandered towards his coat-pocket. Mr. Nickens observed the movement, and with easy promptness produced a revolver, with which he toyed lightly, in such wise that Mr. Sharples could not fail to appreciate the possibility of its exploding in his direction.

‘No barney, now,’ observed Mr. Nickens significantly; ‘what d’ye mean by it?’

‘What do I mean by it!’ snarled Mr. Sharples. ‘You’re a pretty sort to bring a tip to, ain’t ye?’

‘Bring it straight, then,’ returned Mr. Nickens bluntly.

‘Straight!’ snorted Mr. Sharples in disgust. ‘What’s straight? Do you know? Not you. Straight is square, straight is. And I’m straight.’

‘Oh, you’re straight, Billy Sharples, are you? Well, so is this,’ observed Mr. Nickens with a display of teeth, at the same time tapping the revolver with villainous pleasantry. ‘Now, what did you come for? Out with it. I’m not taking any cod.’

Not having come to Mr. Nickens to administer to him that equivocal luxury, Mr. Sharples disclaimed any such intention, and consented to state the object of his errand.

‘I come to tell ye,’ he growled savagely, ‘that ye needn’t go snuffin’ at Da Costa’s to-night.’

‘Oh, I needn’t—eh?’ rejoined Mr. Nickens curtly. ‘And why not?’

‘‘Cos there ain’t no need,’ Mr. Sharples gruffed shortly.

‘There ain’t no need,’ repeated Mr. Nickens, as if he had registered the fact. ‘Well, I’m waiting.’

Mr. Sharples’ hesitancy did not escape the notice of Mr. Nickens, whose manner became that of a man ready to pounce.

‘Well,’ muttered Mr. Sharples sullenly, ‘there ain’t no Joe Custer to sniff after.’

‘No Joe Custer to sniff after! What d’ye mean?’

Mr. Nickens seemed to have delight in baiting Mr. Sharples with satanic persistency.

‘What do I mean?’ blurted Mr. Sharples; ‘why, what I say. There ain’t no Joe Custer—he’s dead.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Mr. Nickens, regarding Mr. Sharples with a screwed stare.

‘There’s no “what” about it,’ responded Mr. Sharples doggedly. ‘He’s dead.’

By this time Mr. Nickens had apparently succeeded in accepting the fact. He leaned forward with curiously expressive deliberateness, and levelled his stare full in Mr. Sharples’ face.

‘Oh,’ he said slowly, and with grim significance,

‘Joe Custer is dead, is he, Billy Sharples? How much do you know about his croaking—eh? How much did you have to do with it that you should know it so soon, and be so cocksure about it—eh?’

‘Curse ye!’ Mr. Sharples exploded. ‘What d’ye mean?’

Mr. Nickens fingered his revolver amiably, and answered Mr. Sharples with sinister pleasantry.

‘I mean, Billy Tough,’ he said, ‘that I want to be certain that you are not making me an accessory after the fact. See, Billy?’ he continued, in the same level, dry tone—‘accessory after the fact. I am spry, mortal spry, and I might have occasion to shoot you.’

‘Shoot!’ ejaculated Mr. Sharples in diplomatic disgust. ‘How much shootin’ would ye have had a chance of doin’ if I’d let ye go to Da Costa’s, with all the splits about? Not much for seven years, I reckon. You’d have walked slap into the nab; for they’d have spotted ye in a jiff, and would soon have made ye look pretty in the bracelets. You deserve to have a good pal, you do,’ concluded Mr. Sharples resentfully.

‘You chump!’ snarled Mr. Nickens; ‘a yard of rope is better than a pair of darbies, is it? Do you reckon I want my neck stretched?’

‘Bah!’ volleyed Mr. Sharples in contempt.

‘This mornin’ ye said ye’d like to see me a-knockin’ Joe Custer on the head; now ye’re snivellin’ about your ugly neck. Can’t a cove come from Bevis Marks without bein’ told he’s done a murder? I was sniffin’ around, and see a crowd, I tell ye; and when I shoved close up I see it was Joe Custer, and I see that somebody had done for him with a oner on the nob, for a cert. Do ye think I was jake enough to hang about after that? Not likely. I cleared in a jiff, and brought ye the tip; and ye don’t even offer a cove a drink.’

‘And who gave him the oner on the head?’ asked Mr. Nickens sardonically.

‘How do I know?’ retorted Mr. Sharples fiercely.

Mr. Nickens’s reply to this challenge was curiously methodical. He rose leisurely from his chair, with his hand visibly straining its grip on the revolver. The intention of the glance that he flickered at Mr. Sharples was not fathomable; it was partly casual, partly deliberate. When he stood erect he had only to stoop to be able to touch Mr. Sharples’ chest. With his disengaged hand he lightly tapped the front of Mr. Sharples’ coat. ‘Let’s have a look at it,’ he said coolly.

Mr. Sharples scowled upward, and showed his teeth. He made no movement to comply with

the demand. His expression was that of a motionless beast silently revolving the best means of taking his prey unaware.

‘All right,’ said Mr. Nickens easily, resuming his seat; ‘you can keep it there. I reckon I know what the game has been. Fancy you’ve done the clever trick, eh? How d’you know,’ he broke off almost fiercely, ‘that this was Custer’s catch after all?’

Mr. Sharples inwardly jumped. The consideration that Joe Custer had possibly had no knowledge of the contemplated plunder at the East India Docks was one which had never entered into his gin-inflamed calculations.

‘You have done a pretty clever thing, haven’t ye?’ Mr. Nickens flaunted with contempt. ‘We can’t be certain now whether it was Custer’s job or not; and if it was his job, all chance of getting pointers has croaked with him. You’ve put out the gas pretty nicely, ye beauty.’

The abuse of Mr. Nickens was producing a sobering effect upon Mr. Sharples, and he roused himself with the motion of a bear exerting himself to action. The movement brought him sudden reassurance and recollection.

‘What a fly cove ye are!’ he scoffed, with a scowl. ‘Supposin’ I’m drunk, supposin’ I’ve done what ye’re so mighty cocksure about—d’ye reckon

I'm such a infant as not to know what I was after? If ye want to know anything, it was Joe Custer's job. But it ain't now,' he grinned villainously.

'How do you know it was Custer's job?' demanded Mr. Nickens, with quite an accommodating growl of blunt concession.

''Cos I do. Never mind how,' retorted Mr. Sharples in a tone which left no doubt of his own satisfaction. 'I don't go about with me eyes shut. When I got wind of him a-kickin' about for a paper as was supposed to 'ave been dropped at Da Costa's it was quite good enough for me.'

'And you knocked him on the head,' suggested Mr. Nickens blackly, by way of cynical summarization.

'Well, and what if I did?' demanded Mr. Sharples gruffly. 'Ain't it made the road clear for you?'

'And for you, too,' returned Mr. Nickens ambiguously.

'What d'ye mean?' challenged Mr. Sharples fiercely.

Mr. Nickens passed his fingers across his throat and swung them into the air with quite congenial relish.

'Newgate, I mean,' he said, with dry facetiousness. 'Ke-e-e-e!'

In which pleasant articulation Mr. Sharples was

evidently invited by Mr. Nickens to imagine himself dropping at the end of a rope.

The humour of Mr. Sharples, by some strange freak of perversity, seemed to be by no means in harmony with the saturnine pleasantry of Mr. Nickens. He failed entirely to appreciate the picturesqueness of Mr. Nickens's sinister waggery, and he leaned forward, with his teeth grating, and with his under jaw protruding.

'You snide!' he hissed venomously. 'You'd give me away, would ye? You'd give the 'tecs the anonermous tip, eh? You'd post it from Leman Street, or the Minories, p'raps, just to cover your own tracks. Well, do it, and if ye don't swing to keep me company my name ain't Bill Sharples. Ye seem to forget that I can make ye out, not accessory after the fact, as ye call it, but before it. Now, what d'ye say? You don't shift me out o' this here snap: are ye square on the job, or ain't ye? There's the little beauty ye wanted to see,' he digressed, producing the jemmy from his coat pocket. 'Pretty, ain't it? I put it handy, in case I might have some argyment with you. But back it goes, Sammy Nicks. We can do without him—we can. Now shoot. Why don't ye shoot, Sammy? Ye'll get a lot o' good out of it. Think, p'raps, 'twould be better to give me away, eh? Well, try it, and see how I'll

get even with ye. Thought I was boozed and ye'd got me by the tail, didn't ye? Well, is it a square deal for Friday, or ain't it?'

Mr. Nickens glared at Mr. Sharples with sour malevolence.

'Can you row?' he demanded curtly.

'Can I row!' replied Mr. Sharples contemptuously. 'What d'ye think?'

'If you're sober on Thursday night,' growled Mr. Nickens, 'come here at six o'clock; if you're not, stay away. If you come, I'll tell you what I mean; but I won't have any drunken dummy tipping me up. We may have to row, but I'll give a squint round to-morrow to see. We've got to get into the dock before we can pull off the trick—that's what I mean, to begin with, if you want to know.'

'Well,' nodded Mr. Sharples suggestively, 'see you squint straight, that's all.'

CHAPTER X

POINTS FROM A PIECE OF PRECOCITY

THE arrival of Richard Markham at Bevis Marks was signalized by no portentous sign or manifestation. Bevis Marks wore that air of self-absorption which is the chronic characteristic of every city side-street. There was no indication that any magic would place Markham in possession of those things unknown which he had been led by a romantic itching to attempt to discover.

But his curiosity was still keen. In a few moments he found Duke's Court, but Duke's Court was in a state of empty and callous unconcern at its grim notoriety. Somewhere within this blank, stony passage the man Custer had fallen. But where? Perhaps the murderer had crouched in this open doorway.

Mr. Richard reached the open door just as the sound of descending feet came down the stairs.

The feet, when they appeared, supported a boy, who, at first glance, seemed to consist for the most

part of apron. He might have been born with the apron, and the apron might have grown with him as he grew. Above the bib of the apron appeared his head, and in his head were his eyes. His head was the natural place for them, no doubt, but they seemed to call for some uncommon form of particularization. They conveyed to the observer the suggestion of needles, with notes of interrogation and exclamation balanced at the end of their points. His mouth was formidable, being obviously the firing-place of a whole battery of adolescent badinage and sarcasm. In his hands he carried a plate-disordered tray, which had plainly borne the attack of some devastator in search of a late breakfast or an early lunch.

The appearance of this shock-headed atom brought to Mr. Richard an inspiration.

‘Hallo, Jimmy!’ he exclaimed with familiar cheeriness; ‘I guess you’re the boy for me. Where did that murder happen?’

‘Garn!’ fired the atom distantly, and with dignified sarcasm. ‘Who are you callin’ Jimmy?’

Mr. Richard skilfully dropped a half-crown, and the atom’s eyes, displacing wary suspicion for a moment, grew large.

‘What!’ laughed Mr. Richard, as he recovered the coin and returned it to his pocket, ‘don’t you like being called Jimmy?’

'Yah!' grinned the atom, with the disappearance of the silver. 'Think ye'll have me on toast, don't ye?'

'I should be very sorry,' returned Mr. Richard genuinely.

'Who d'ye think ye're gettin' at, then?' challenged the atom with fine scorn. 'Callin' me Jimmy!' he added, with unspeakable disdain. 'He ought to be set up for a cockshy, or grounded up for sossidges, he ought!'

'I am sure I hope he will,' agreed Mr. Richard, with shameless bloodthirstiness. 'Have you given him a walloping?'

'Ave I given him a wallopin'?' echoed the atom contemptuously. 'He won't cheek me agin. He knows whether I knows how long his nose is, he do;' and the atom made a picturesque motion, as if he were giving an immortalizing pull at a bell-handle.

Mr. Richard's moral obliquity went to the length of laughing his commendation.

'Well, I'm glad of that,' he said; 'but you haven't told me where that murder was done—Billy, is it?'

'No, it ain't,' repulsed the atom with fine inflation. 'Joe's my name, if ye want to know.' Master Joseph was evidently of opinion that the sensational death of Joe Custer had

rendered the name of Joe superlatively illustrious.

‘That’s a distinguished name, Joey,’ approved Mr. Richard, allowing some coins to jingle in his pocket. ‘Joseph did wonders in Egypt, you know.’

‘Yes, perhaps he did,’ commented Master Joseph magnificently; ‘but Bevis Marks, and Saturday night at the Pavilion, is quite good enough for me.’

‘Going next Saturday night?’ inquired Mr. Richard artlessly, with another casual rattle of his pocket.

‘Depends whether I’ve got enough bits,’ returned Master Joseph shrewdly.

‘Well, you haven’t told me about the murder yet,’ observed Mr. Richard somewhat inconsequently.

‘What d’ye want to know for?’ demanded Master Joseph, not without suspicion.

‘Curiosity, Joey; that’s all,’ avowed Mr. Richard, ordering his countenance more harmlessly than ever. ‘Did you know him?’

‘Did I know him?’ ejaculated Master Joseph majestically. ‘I should say I did. He was a topper, he was. Give me many a bob, he did,’ he concluded suggestively.

Mr. Richard was appropriately sympathetic.

‘And now, I suppose, you won’t get any bobs at all?’ he commiserated with yet another rattle. ‘Where did they knock him down, Joey—here?’

‘No,’ explained Master Joseph with importance. ‘Some o’ the coves who work up here come into the guv’nor’s place after the ’tecs had been smellin’ about, an’ I heard ’em say as how the ’tecs reckoned that the bloke what downed him must have been a-hidin’ in this ’ere door. They reckoned that he stepped out o’ the door to meet him, and let fly at him as he come into the passage. Anyways, that’s where he was layin’ when I see him after the job;’ and with nose, tray, and foot, Master Joseph indicated a spot midway between the door and the entrance to the court.

‘You saw him, then, did you, Joey?’ remarked Mr. Richard with envious interest.

‘Yes,’ declared Master Joseph with the pride which the importance of the occasion warranted.

‘It was up at our place as soon as he was found,’ Master Joseph amplified, evincing a readiness to assume belligerent inclinations towards anyone who might contradict him; ‘and I did a slide out before there was a crowd.’

‘Did he live here, then?’ asked Mr. Richard innocently.

‘Live here?’ echoed Master Joseph, condescending to emancipate Mr. Richard from his ignorance. ‘Yuh! You ain’t got all your tiles on, have ye?’

Mr. Richard modestly thought that perhaps he had not.

‘Live here?’ repeated Master Joseph scornfully; ‘no, o’ course he didn’t. He wasn’t such a duffer. D’ye know po’try? Well—

“Joey Custer is my name,
England is my nation,
Tredegar Square my dwellin’-place,
And sparklers my vocation.”

But it ain’t now,’ he concluded with a half-rueful grin. ‘Suppose they’ll bury him at Bow Cemetery.’

‘Oh, he lived at Tredegar Square, did he?’ observed Mr. Richard casually.

‘Now ye want to know something, don’t ye?’ fleered Master Joseph superciliously.

‘Not if you don’t want to tell me, Joey, of course,’ Mr. Richard disclaimed diplomatically. ‘I am afraid I must be going now. But you’ve interested me, Joey, and there’s a shilling for you. I should have liked to stop to hear a little more, and perhaps to have given you another shilling—if it had been very good; but I am afraid I must be getting off.’

Master Joseph saw glowing visions, not only of the Pavilion Theatre on Saturday night, but also of an almost limitless supply of lemonade and Banbury cakes, with sausages and mashed potatoes to follow the play, supplemented by stewed eels, penny hot fruit-pies, baked chestnuts, and saucers of whelks. His fingers secured the shilling from the tray with prompt gratification, and, as he transferred it to his pocket, its donor turned to depart. But Mr. Richard had not taken two steps before he faced about.

‘Oh, Joey,’ he observed, ‘there is one thing you might tell me: was Joe Custer his real name?’ I once knew a Joe Custer,’ he added, fibbing unblushingly and artistically, ‘and I should like to know if this was the same man. Of course, he didn’t take care of other people’s property for them in those days, but you never know what a man may come to do, Joey—and that’s a fact.’

For a moment Master Joseph was suspicious, but visions of another possible shilling scattered his reserve and overcame his scruples. He grinned enigmatically.

‘Supposin’ I got my head clouted for tellin’ ye. What then?’ he queried pertinently. ‘I should look funny, shouldn’t I?’

‘Well, Joey,’ returned Mr. Richard with under-

standing, and laughing without disguise, 'I suppose a shilling in advance would set it right?'

'Yes, it might,' the reprobate astutely agreed.

'Well!' suggested Mr. Richard promptly.

'Well,' grinned Master Joseph, 'he was Joe Custer right enough, but fancy coveys like him has a likin' for fancy names. He was very fond o' the name of Bob Sherman, he was; and all his letters used to come to our place for him in that name—Mr. Robert Sherman, wrote pertickler careful.'

'And which is your place, Joey?' inquired Mr. Richard incidentally; 'is it near here?'

'Da Costa's—just up the street,' Master Joseph disclosed, now thoroughly bent upon earning the additional shilling that Mr. Richard seemed inclined to bestow upon him as solatium in advance for any kicks and cuffs which he might have to suffer.

'Just up the street, eh, Joey?' observed Mr. Richard guilelessly. 'I suppose you haven't a portrait of him there; but do you know anybody who has one?'

'Crikey! You are interested, you are,' Master Joseph observed with pert sagaciousness. 'Ye're almost as bad as a blessed 'tec. But blowed if I know where ye can get a photer. There's

Sammy Nickens, he may have one. They used to work together once, but they split over something. And Joe, he was a super'or cove, he was.'

'And where does Sammy Nickens live?' inquired Mr. Richard in a tone which indicated that he accepted Master Joseph's opinion that Mr. Samuel Nickens was an inferior creature.

'Number 199, St. Peter's Street, Mile End Road ; only mind ye don't let him know I told ye,' directed Master Joseph shrewdly.

'Of course not, Joey ; you may be sure of that,' assured Mr. Richard readily. 'There's another eighteenpence for you, my boy ; and if I want to know anything more I'll look out for you again. Now I must be off. But wait a moment, though. What do you think about his being knocked on the head, Joey? Do you know whether there was anybody who owed him a grudge?'

'Well, I should think so,' declared Master Joseph with disconcerting assurance. 'Everybody owes ye a grudge if ye win at anything ; and Joe, he was a tip-topper, he was. You bet I'd like to know who done for him myself. They was pretty slippery about it, whoever they was. Last time I saw him was one o'clock yesterday. Fancied he must have dropped one of his letters in our

shop on Monday night, he did, and thought perhaps I might have swept it up with the muck.'

'And had you?' asked Mr. Richard with an interest that was vastly keener than Master Joseph could have suspected from a study of his face.

'Shouldn't think so, but I might have done,' returned Master Joseph crisply. 'If I did, I shoved it in the bin; and the only chance was that the old gal, Mother Sharples, who comes round to scratch up the scraps in the morning, might have picked it out o' the muck. In a fair stew about it, he was; so I tells him he could find the old gal somewhere in Wraggley's Rents, back o' the Minorities, and off he goes.'

'And did he find it, do you know, Joey?' inquired Mr. Richard, his interest increasing.

'No, I don't reckon he did,' Master Joseph replied as pertly as before, ''cos I fancied the old gal might know something, and I asked her this morning. He drummed her up at about two o'clock, she said; but she couldn't find no paper. She was to have another look, and was to bring it round to our place at six o'clock, if she found it; but as she didn't find it, she didn't come. It's a queer bit o' biz.'

'You're right, Joey,' commented Mr. Richard

approvingly : 'it is a queer business ; and next time there is a murder near here I will look out for you again. Good-morning, Joey.'

Master Joseph grinned amusedly, paused to absorb a back view of Mr. Richard Markham, and then shuffled away to give Da Costa's knives the benefit of his energies.

A glimpse of Mr. Richard's face as he turned his back upon Master Joseph would probably have mystified that precocious youth. His features rippled with satisfaction. This initial success was not only flattering to his estimate of himself, and complimentary to his inquisitorial powers ; it was also inspiring. By the time he reached Leadenhall Street, Willis, of the *Courier*, had receded to the horizon of his plans. Had he been acting upon the credentials of the *Courier*, he would have felt himself bound in honour to write something of the facts which he had gathered ; whereas they were just the facts which, having regard to the task which he had initiated for his entertainment, it was eminently desirable that he should keep to himself. The solicitude of Mr. Joe Custer for the recovery of his missing document, the cleavage between him and Mr. Samuel Nickens, the obscure motive for the crime itself, had already inspired him with certain theoretical suspicions.

‘We’ll see if we can’t contrive to have a glimpse of you, Mr. Nickens, before many hours are past,’ he mused; and then he jumped into a Chelsea bus, and rumbled on his way back to Sloane Street, and to lunch.

CHAPTER XI

A JOURNEY AND ITS EVENTS

THE effect of an additional night's repose upon the Honourable Basil Markham was apparently magical. The morning which followed the adventure of Mr. Richard in Bevis Marks saw the Honourable Basil's vapours dissipated and his disordered nerves restored to a state of equability which, on the score of rendering him more endurable than might otherwise have been the case, left nothing to be desired. Before the morning meal had progressed far he announced to the Honourable Mrs. Basil his intention to proceed to Southampton, on the business of a syndicate in which he had a directoral interest; and the Honourable Mrs. Basil, whose idea of wifehood was that the Honourable Basil had taken her to keep, and that she had only to accept the fact as a befitting ordinance until the dining-table should cease to be spread, formally received the intimation with 'Very well' as her sole comment. The

further announcement that her spouse might be detained at Southampton for the night was accepted by her with the same ordinary acquiescence.

Being fortified by breakfast, the Honourable Basil resumed his attack upon his morning paper. Mr. Richard, upon the opposite side of the hearth, did likewise, disclosing the depravity of his tastes by beginning with the criminal records.

‘Hum!’ he observed presently, ‘they don’t seem to have found anything on that fellow.’

‘What fellow?’ inquired the Honourable Basil in a kind of straddle between reading and hearing.

‘That man Custer, who was murdered in Bevis Marks,’ explained Mr. Richard, without detaching himself from his paper. ‘I thought it just possible that they might have found something on him which would give a clue to the recent robberies; but it appears they haven’t. The inquest was held yesterday, and it was said that nothing of any consequence had been found.’

‘So I’ve observed,’ remarked the Honourable Basil with inferior interest. ‘A thief, who is anything of a thief, never keeps anything that will give him away, and I don’t suppose the police expected to discover more than they found. But why this interest in the fellow?’ This question delivered, the Honourable Basil dropped his paper

upon the arm of his chair and looked Mr. Richard studiously in his face.

‘Interest,’ repeated Mr. Richard, taking quickly to nimble evasion. ‘I didn’t say that I had any interest in him. My only idea was that which I mentioned just now.’

‘That’s all very well,’ commented the Honourable Basil with paternal gravity ; ‘but you would acquire a great deal more worth learning on the criminal side of your profession if you transferred your study of it from your newspaper to the Law Courts, and got down to the Strand a little earlier in the day than one o’clock in the afternoon. You don’t expect briefs to come to you by magic in Sloane Street, do you?’

‘If I did, sir, I shouldn’t get them—I know that much,’ acknowledged Mr. Richard with easy frankness. ‘But my own opinion is, that if I got to the Strand at four o’clock in the afternoon it would be quite soon enough for me. In fact, I hate the law and all its works. With its quibble this and its quibble that your life itself grows into a quibble. To me a thing is either right or wrong ; if it is right, it isn’t wrong ; and if it is wrong, it isn’t right ; and it doesn’t require a regiment of legal quibblers to march with section this, counter-march with section that, and skirmish with chapter the other to turn it inside out and

upside down. I wish to goodness, sir, that instead of eating my dinners in the Middle Temple, I had starved until I could shoot something to eat in South Africa.'

'I wonder if you have been giving your Sunday afternoons to stump Socialism in the Park?' queried the Honourable Basil dryly.

'No, sir, I haven't,' Mr. Richard returned promptly. 'But I endorse the opinion that the law is "a hass."'

'That's why many men make money at it,' astutely observed the Honourable Basil, more dryly than before. 'I notice that you don't describe yourself.'

'An ass, very likely, sir,' admitted Mr. Richard readily; 'but if Nature made me in that shape, it is my misfortune, not my fault.'

'It requires an ass to appreciate an ass,' remarked the Honourable Basil with dissatisfaction; 'and I may permit myself to say that I am not of that breed. You would satisfy me a great deal more if you scribbled less, ignored Custers, and talked a little more with a brief in your hand and a fee in your pocket. It is time, too, that you gave some serious thought to settling down.'

'I have given it, sir,' Mr. Richard announced with unruffled amiability.

‘You have given it,’ remarked the Honourable Basil with quickened interest. ‘And who is the lady?’

‘Her name, sir, is Miss Cicely Rowley,’ Mr. Richard replied in a tone which suggested that if the law was his bane he had found an excellent antidote.

The Honourable Basil did not seem to be hugely gratified. He rubbed his nose as if that member was scarcely as comfortable as could be desired, and he looked at Mr. Richard with direct excogitation.

‘I don’t know, I am sure,’ he mused, as if he were making allowance for a little possible indefiniteness. ‘You have made a choice which I think is not one that I should have made. Our likes and dislikes are not always things for which we can give a clear reason; and I am bound to confess that Sir George Rowley is not a man whom I can welcome with much cordiality.’

‘I shall not marry, Sir George, sir,’ Mr. Richard replied, not unnaturally, and with undeniable logic.

‘You will not marry Sir George, true,’ acknowledged the Honourable Basil indifferently; ‘but you will ally him with us. Passing civility in social intercourse is one thing, arranging marriage settlements with him is quite another. At present

he is an acquaintance ; marrying his daughter makes him a connection, and brings him into the family. Have you spoken to him yet ?

‘I thought of doing so this morning,’ Mr. Richard announced serenely.

‘Then you haven’t got her yet?’ commented the Honourable Basil, as if he had discovered a new spring of confidence and satisfaction. ‘I think it is highly probable that his sentiments will resemble my own, in which case I cannot say that I shall be disappointed.’

Mr. Richard’s detestation of the law in no way indisposed him to resort to its interrogatory tactics. He looked at the Honourable Basil in a manner which suggested that he agreed that there was much to be said in favour of the paternal point of view, but that he considered that the lady herself was entitled to have something said in her favour.

‘I suppose you do not object to Miss Rowley herself?’ he said incidentally.

‘Not in the least,’ confessed the Honourable Basil freely. ‘She is a very nice girl, and would make an acceptable Mrs. Markham if she had a name that was not Rowley. But I don’t think you will get her—that’s all.’

‘That remains to be seen, sir,’ Mr. Richard quietly observed. ‘But if I do—what then?’

A JOURNEY AND ITS EVENTS 119

The desire of the Honourable Basil was evidently to dismiss the subject. His face developed an expression of botheration, as if his own abstract thoughts and the necessity of attending to the external demands which were being made upon his attention insistently mixed themselves in clashing confusion. Finally, he forced his brows upward with an impatient effort.

‘Pshaw!’ he exclaimed; ‘I don’t believe you will get her;’ and for some reason which the Honourable Basil did not seem ready enough to put into actual shape he appeared to be convinced in his belief. ‘It is amusing you, I dare say,’ he added; ‘and, as a bit of amusement, I don’t object to your making the attempt.’

‘Thank you, sir; then I’ll make it,’ returned Mr. Richard, as the Honourable Basil rose from his chair to make ready for departure. ‘By the way,’ he added, as he followed the paternal example, ‘I don’t suppose you will see anything of Gunning at Southampton; but, if you do, I should be glad to send him my kind regards. I saw in yesterday’s paper that he is expected home from the Cape to-day, with a big bag as the result of his two years’ trip up country. He’s coming by the *East Anglia*, and will, no doubt, land at Southampton with the mails.’

‘So I have noticed,’ remarked the Honourable Basil, ‘and for that reason I should like to see him in advance of anyone else. He may have profitable information worth having ; and if I can manage to see him, I will.’

The two men presently left the house ; and while Mr. Richard made his way to Chelsea Gardens, ordering his method of procedure, and calculating his chances of success with Sir George Rowley, the Honourable Basil directed his course in a cab to Waterloo, and took his ticket for Southampton.

His journey having been without history requires no recital. At Southampton he registered at the Royal Hotel, and he then employed two hours in making calls. At three he had lunched with the Mayor, and at half-past three he stood on the South Africa quay of the Southampton Dock. The *East Anglia* was already drawing alongside the landing-stage, and the gangway having been lowered, he went on board the vessel. Five minutes later, fussy little donkey-engines on the ship’s decks were working with a consequential clatter, and with as much preposterous violence of industry as if they had themselves brought the great liner through the billows from the Cape. Chains ran up and down, sending luggage and mail-bags overboard, with a skittish home-again

rattle, and from stem to stern the steamship became alive with faces which still bore the impress of the adventured deep.

The Honourable Basil made his way amidships in search of the redoubtable Gunning, and he found that the quest for that Nimrod was as the search for a jewel in the heart of a maze. He had traversed the starboard gangway without encountering any sign of either Gunning or his baggage; but abreast the bridge he stumbled against the chief steward, and plied him with inquiry.

‘Captain Gunning,’ replied that worthy, firing his words in short jerks, as he bustled past. ‘Port gangway—if he hasn’t gone over the side.’

With this somewhat abbreviated information for his guidance, the Honourable Basil explored the port gangway, which, being furthest from the quay, was perceptibly less crowded than the starboard quarter. Cabin-doors were standing open, being so left by passengers who had no longer any use for them. The Honourable Basil was methodical in his search. He looked into the empty berths one by one, and he presently glanced into one which seemed to engage his passing interest. He stepped into it and looked around; and in the survey his glance fell upon a double-

door locker, which turned his general interest into particular curiosity. Both doors seemed to incline outward, as if the occupant of the cabin had hastily turned his key in the lock in the belief that the bolt upon the inside of the holding door had been shot into its socket, so making the locking of the cupboard effectual.

The curiosity of the Honourable Basil drew him to the locker; he opened its doors, and looked within. Three or four brandy and whisky bottles, a half-empty soda-water syphon, and an almost empty cigar-box appeared to be its sole contents, save the solitary exception of a small and apparently unconsidered packet lying in a corner behind the spirit bottles, by which it was partially concealed. Its outer cover was of canvas, and the cord which bound it was strongly knotted and sealed.

For a moment the Honourable Basil seemed to consider; then, as if in a fit of absence of mind, he dropped the packet into his own coat-pocket, and closed the doors a little more securely than he had found them. The next instant he quitted the cabin, to continue elsewhere his search for that eminent hunter, Edwin Augustus Gunning, who, judged by appearances, had already abandoned this part of his quarters on board the ship. As he stepped into the gangway, and turned towards the

stern of the vessel, a woman entered it behind him. She caught a momentary glimpse of his face in profile, and with a start she came to a pause. Then her lips tightened spasmodically, while a keen, memorial light intensified in her eyes and changed the whole expression of her face.

‘Basil Markham,’ she said to herself strangely. ‘He to be the first that I should see—after all these years!’

A quick thought seemed to come to her, and she hurried forward to the door of the cabin from which she had seen Markham step into the gangway. As a passenger of the ship she scarcely had need to satisfy her curiosity as to the cabin which he had been visiting by making a close inspection of it; nevertheless, she glanced into the empty berth, and at the painted word over its door. She nodded significantly.

Unconscious of this feminine observation, the Honourable Basil renewed his search for that distinguished sportsman whose classic essays on the subject of big game were accustomed to be published to the world under the easily penetrated anonymity of ‘E. A.,’ and in a few moments he again stood on the main-deck, scanning the animated scene forward. A nondescript pyramid of baggage was being swung by a steam winch

over the ship's side, and a tall personage was watching the operation with critical interest. Towards him Markham immediately made his way, and when he came alongside of him he tapped him upon the shoulder with a heartiness which seemed to suggest that all other things of the moment were being banished to the limbo of forgetfulness by the gratification of the meeting.

'Ha! here you are, Gunning!' he exclaimed genially. 'Glad to give you first welcome. Have been looking for you everywhere.'

'What, Markham; you here!' greeted Gunning warmly. 'Didn't expect a pleasant collision with the old set quite so soon. How is everybody? All right, I hope. Have been raking my lumber together. There's only one more lot to go over, and then I'll be with you. What's brought you down?'

'A little financial business,' Markham explained; 'but I saw that you were coming by the *East Anglia*, and, being here, I thought I would give myself the pleasure of being the first to welcome you back. Had a good time?'

'Splendid,' acknowledged Gunning unreservedly.

'Am glad of that,' Markham rejoined cordially. 'We may expect something valuable and interest-

ing presently, I suppose—only you must not give away all your best things in print. What are you doing on Saturday evening? If nothing, dine with us.'

'With pleasure,' assented Gunning readily. 'But aren't you going up to town with us?'

'No, unfortunately,' Markham announced with dissatisfaction. 'Nothing would please me better; but I have not yet been able to close negotiations, and must stay over until to-morrow.'

'Well, we must make it Saturday evening, then,' observed Gunning. 'There's the last heap; now we can get the motion of this old kettle out of our legs, and try terra-firma again.'

He gave a last glance around the friendly vessel that had carried him through the dangers of the fickle deep for nearly three weeks, and then led the way to the head of the landing-stage gangway. As he reached it, with Markham in his wake, a woman simultaneously arrived at the spot. He paused to give her precedence, and as she passed her adroit glance challenged the eyes of Markham. He saw and recognised, and a swift uneasiness paled his face.

An hour later the boat-train was speeding on its way to Waterloo, and the Honourable Basil, seated in his room at the Royal Hotel, was weigh-

ing in his hand a packet which he had just taken from his overcoat pocket. His manner seemed to be that of a man who was puzzled to know what best to do with a thing which, by the process of finding, had strangely come into his possession.

CHAPTER XII

TWO LOVERS AND A DRAWN BADGER

JUBILATION is a fine thing, and Mr. Richard Markham when he returned to Cadogan Terrace after his interview with Sir George Rowley was as merry as a cricket.

‘Hey, Nibs,’ he signalled to that young lady as she came to the foot of the stairs and passed towards the door of the morning-room; ‘come here a moment.’

Miss Nibs went there a moment, ‘there’ being the dining-room, into which Mr. Richard had betaken himself immediately on his return.

‘How’s that for the Matrimonial Stakes, Nibs?’ he asked, with a broad smile of settled satisfaction.

He had taken a small morocco leather case from his pocket, and was now exhibiting a diamond engagement - ring, nestling expectantly in the creviced cushion of white satin velvet within it.

An artful twinkle was in Miss Nibs’ eyes.

‘You are not going to marry that, are you?’ she inquired with mischievous innocence, linking her fingers behind her and gazing at him as if in pity for the derangement which had come to his senses.

For a moment Mr. Richard was taken aback, and he looked at Miss Nibs probingly. Then he remembered Master Joseph, of Bevis Marks, and the caustic flowers of speech with which he presented the passing fragrance of his mind.

‘Get along, Nibs—who are you getting at?’ he rallied. ‘Puts you and Bob Leslie a long way behind, doesn’t it?’

Mr. Richard was obviously in a playful, badgering mood.

‘Lord Robert Leslie is never behind, except when it is impertinent to be forward,’ remarked Miss Nibs with dignity and emphasis.

‘You don’t say so, Nibs!’ commented Mr. Richard in surprise. ‘But I guess I’ve got a start of him this time. First home with Miss Cissie Rowley by a day’s march. Suppose he’ll get home with Niss Nellie Markham to-morrow. A little beauty, isn’t it?’ he added, admiring the ring. ‘Bought it just now. Never let consent stand, Nibs. It’s like milk, and may turn sour. Sir George was almost as sweet as fresh cream this morning, so I lost no time in buying this. Cost

seven leading articles at three guineas an article,' he concluded a little ruefully.

'Did it?' remarked Miss Nibs sweetly. 'So I suppose you have done with murders now?'

'Not a bit of it, Nibs,' disclaimed Mr. Richard airily. 'Was never more fond of murders in my life. . . . Hullo, Nibs! what have you got there?'

Miss Nibs had withdrawn her hands from behind her, and now held them folded at her waist. Her left hand being undermost, an unfamiliar sparkle of diamonds was displayed upon the third finger of her right hand. Mr. Richard looked at it with the expression of a man who felt himself to have a grievance.

'How far do you think Lord Robert is in front?' inquired Miss Nibs, more sweetly than ever. 'Shall I call him to measure the distance?'

'Is he in there?' asked Mr. Richard, indicating the morning-room, and ignoring the challenge.

Miss Nibs nodded pleasantly.

'That's why I was going in. I have been up to my room to get this for him,' she explained, producing a cabinet portrait of herself in evening dress. 'Seems to me that I am a long way ahead of Cissie Rowley at present,' she concluded, with provoking graciousness.

'All right, Nibs, I don't mind,' he returned in

friendly dudgeon. 'It's a level race to the altar next. I'll tell you what I'll do : I will wager you a box of chocolate to a new dressing-bag that I find out who stole the Leslie jewels, and then be at the church as soon as you. We've got to make each other wedding presents, I suppose.'

'You don't want much,' observed Miss Nibs disdainfully.

'Well, if you won't have the chocolate,' observed Mr. Richard easily, 'I'll take on the handicap, just to amuse myself. Where's the mater ?'

Another nod in the direction of the morning-room enlightened Mr. Richard on the subject of his inquiry.

'Delighted,' added Miss Nibs with monosyllabic expressiveness.

'Is she, though?' remarked Mr. Richard with understanding. 'And the pater—what does he say ?'

'Robert did not know that the pater was at Southampton to-day, so he is coming again to-morrow morning. The mater has invited him to lunch.'

'All right, Nibs ; you go in. I won't spoil sport. I'll stay here, and will congratulate him when he comes out,' intimated Mr. Richard magnanimously. 'Luck to you, Sis, and plenty of it.'

By the way, if I am not back by half-past seven to-night,' he added, 'I shall dine out. You might tell the mater.'

Miss Nibs cheerfully undertook the important commission, and flitted from the room, leaving Mr. Richard to the society of his own buoyant reflections. His thoughts waved in two directions: when he was not thinking of Chelsea Gardens, he was thinking of St. Peter's Street, Mile End; and when he was not thinking of St. Peter's Street, Mile End, he was thinking very vividly of Chelsea Gardens. He had never seen St. Peter's Street, Mile End; and Chelsea Gardens, therefore, presented itself to his mental vision as by far the more persistently fascinating of the two places. But presently he set a firm check upon his wayward imaginings, and braced himself to concentrated thought. If whimsicality had carried him to Bevis Marks, he had there gleaned information which now piqued his curiosity. If information was to be turned into discovery, it was incumbent upon him to devise some plan of campaign. He perceived that one of the first essentials to his further progress was a glimpse of Mr. Samuel Nickens, inasmuch as it was imperative that he should be able to know Mr. Nickens wherever he might chance to see him. With this recognition Mr. Richard resolved that by hook or by crook he

would see Mr. Nickens. How he would carry this decision into effect he could not at the moment determine, but the hour for putting it into motion he did not for an instant consider. That question was instinctively solved with the shaping of the decision itself. The time to see Mr. Nickens would be at night.

With these points settled, Mr. Richard prepared himself to congratulate Lord Robert Leslie as a prospective brother-in-law, and to do his duty to lunch. In both these domestic tasks he acquitted himself cheerfully, and with success. The afternoon he devoted to the despatch of his literary engagements, and at the stroke of half-past five he turned his face towards the east.

St. Peter's Street seemed to be long in coming, but at last Mr. Richard found himself encompassed by its unfamiliar surroundings. So unlike was it to the world to which he was accustomed that he felt a novel sensation of curiosity. The street was lamp-lit, and yet was broodsomely dim. In his search for 199 Markham chose to begin with the eastward side of the road. At a short distance from the main thoroughfare of the Mile End Road he came upon a narrow lane-like turning, having two dwarf houses across its lower end, and suggesting by its appearance nothing more than a cul-de-sac. Markham noted it with interest, as being

a place which might possibly offer him useful service. This done, he continued his course up the street, methodically noting the numbering of the houses by the light of the first gas-lamp, which enabled him to determine whether the numerals were composed of odd or even figures, and then carefully calculating his progress to No. 199.

Presently he stood with almost quivering interest and curiosity before the dark front of the house of which he had come in search. Here was the lair of Mr. Samuel Nickens; the problem was, By what means was he to be drawn out of it?

Mr. Richard reflected a moment, and then began to retrace his steps towards the cul-de-sac, carefully counting the houses on his way. This task accomplished to his satisfaction, he turned into the narrow lane, and on reaching its end he discovered that its resemblance to a cul-de-sac was nothing more than an illusory effect produced by the night darkness, and perceived that the lane turned at an acute angle, and continued its course of dwarf dwellings along the back of the gardens of the houses which he had just counted in St. Peter's Street, the pigmy tenements forming one side of the lane and the long back-wall of the gardens defining the other side.

Each of the gardens had a door opening into

this lane ; and, with the gratification which came to him at the discovery, Mr. Richard conceived the one strategic idea for his purpose.

He counted the garden doors until he came to the one which belonged to 199, St. Peter's Street, and then his gratification merged into vibrant eagerness. A gas-lamp against the dwellings threw its light full upon the door.

'Pop a ferret into the front hole,' he chuckled, 'and the rabbit scuttles out of the hole in the rear. If I am to get a glimpse of Mr. Nickens to-night, I am to get it here. But what am I to do for the ferret?'

Mr. Richard passed along to the end of the lane without pausing, revolving devices for a ferret as he went. At the end of the lane he turned and retraced his steps until he again approached Mr. Nickens's garden door. Then he noticed a tableau which he had not observed before. The front-door of a tenement almost opposite Mr. Nickens's garden exit was standing open, and at the threshold were a couple of urchins engrossed in the appropriate amusement of conducting an imaginary police-station, and immersed for the moment in some difference of opinion as to which should be prisoner and which should be policeman.

With a flash of inspiration Mr. Richard formed his plans.

‘Hullo, young uns!’ he exclaimed familiarly, accosting them with the phraseology which he thought they would best understand. ‘All alone?’

‘Yus,’ answered the elder of the pair warily.

‘Like to earn a shilling each?’ he grinned, by way of congenial overture.

‘Yus—rather,’ chorused the pair promptly, dropping their suspiciousness and dismissing their scruples.

‘Well,’ grinned Mr. Richard again ingenuously, ‘I want to have a bit of a game with Old Nickens—know old Nickens?’

‘Yus,’ was the responsive duet, with alacrity. ‘That’s the old buffer’s gate, it is.’

‘I know,’ Mr. Richard again grinned, with mischievous humour. ‘That’s what I want to have the fun with. Pull the door close, and come along. It won’t take a minute, and we’ll give old Nicky a rouser.’

‘Yus; but what about the shillings?’ suggested the imps charily, as they followed in his wake.

‘There’s sixpence each now, and I will give you the others after the fun,’ promised Mr. Richard, with the laudable design of insuring that the urchins should discharge their part of the contract. ‘I must tell you what I want you

to do, and then, if you don't like to do it, you needn't.'

Sixpence *in esse*, and sixpence *in posse*, precipitated their qualms into valorous recklessness. They joined the enterprise with a readiness and a zest which did credit to their natural aptitude for mischief, and to their inborn fondness for impish pursuits. Mr. Richard, in passing, stooped and picked up a granite flint lying in the road.

'Now, here we are, sonnies,' he observed cheerfully, as he again came to the front of Mr. Nickens's establishment; 'and I'll tell you what I want you to do. Give me time to get back and hammer at the garden gate; and then you, Jimmy,' he added, indicating the taller boy, 'slip up and give two loud bangs with the knocker; and you, sonny,' he continued, addressing the shorter urchin, 'shy this stone at the area door. Then both of you cut across the road into that gate and watch the fun. You'll be able to grin at old Nicky there without anybody seeing you. He'll fancy the Roosians have come for him, eh? When everything is quiet again, you toddle back to me, and I'll give you the other shilling. What do you say?'

The pair grinned with relish. This was a proposal which harmonized with their own conception of real fun; they would have banged

the knockers of two dozen doors for the same price.

‘All right, sonnies,’ clenched Mr. Richard, quickly interpreting their acquiescent smirks. ‘Give me time to get round, and then fire away.’

He hurried back to the lane, congratulating himself upon the prospective success of his scheme as he went.

‘Now, Mr. Nickens,’ he said to himself, ‘if you are the man I take you for, and if you have had any hand in recent jewel robberies, you will think the police are paying you a domiciliary visit to-night. If I am not mistaken, a banging at both your front-doors at the same moment will have the effect of sending you flying into the back-street. At any rate, we’ll try it, and see.’

He reached the all-important spot in the lane, but he did not employ his energies in hammering at Mr. Nickens’s garden gate. He inferred that the parents of his juvenile bravoos were either marketing or drinking in a neighbouring tavern, and he ventured upon a bold expedient. Slipping into the house of his two small mercenaries, and masking himself behind the door, he held himself in readiness to watch the gate in the wall.

In St. Peter’s Street the enlisted imps con-

genially performed their share of the mischievous task, the younger of the two with so much thoroughness that, in his gleeful trepidation, he forgot to consider his aim, and sent his stone crashing through one of the glass panels of Mr. Nickens's area door. Within, Mr. Nickens leapt to his feet with an oath and a bound. Mr. Nickens was not alone in this double feat of verbal and muscular celerity. Mr. Bill Sharples imitated his example with electric perfection, and for a moment the pair glared ferociously at each other. But this was no time for active hostilities. The hammering knocker and the shattering glass suggested a simultaneous attack by the police upon the upper and lower front-doors, and the two knaves slipped in desperate haste into the darkness of the garden behind the house.

Mr. Richard heard the approach of quick but lightly-treading feet, and he held his door ajar. Presently the portal in the wall opened with cautious swiftness, and a face showed in the narrow space between the gate and its frame-post. The lamp-light fell upon a pair of wary eyes, which glanced with rapid search up and down the lane. The next moment the owner of the head sprang into the roadway, and in his wake followed a man with a bullet-like head. At the

same moment the first-comer closed and locked the door. Then he turned swiftly upon him of the bullet-head.

‘ You drunken dog !’ he hissed fiercely through grinding teeth. ‘ This is the result of your bungling, is it ?’

With the words still grating through his teeth, he leapt at the fellow who had inflamed his ire ; and with the hand that gripped the key he aimed a murderous blow at his jaw below his ear. A second followed in his eye, and his bullet-head went flying at the wall, against which it struck with a sounding thud.

The assailant did not pause to ascertain the extent of the damage which he had inflicted ; but, taking to his heels, he sped towards the end of the lane, and, turning into another warren, which there branched from it, he disappeared in the darkness.

With the way thus made clear, Mr. Richard issued from his hiding-place, and, seeing neither profit nor advantage to be gained from remaining in the neighbourhood, he dropped a shilling upon the doormat of his retreat, and hastily made his way towards the desirable concealment of the Mile End Road.

At the corner of the lane he encountered his small rascals, compressing themselves into the

deepest shadow of the walls, and shuffling from the rearward scene of their exploit with as much unconscious innocence in their apprehensive gait as they could impress into it. To avoid explanations he was constrained to give them another shilling; the one which he had left for them upon the doormat they would imagine he had dropped.

‘You did it splendid,’ he complimented, eschewing grammar and diplomatically descending to their level, in order to make covert use of it for speed. ‘Old Nicky’s regular mad, and I’ll have the up-and-down grin of him at our sing-song presently. What was it like in front—good?’

‘It was a good job his missus didn’t see us, it was,’ intimated the elder imp. ‘Suppose she was out. Threw the stone through the glass door, he did,’ he amplified, indicating the smaller hero. ‘I’d like to hear her talk when she comes home, I should.’

‘So should I, Jimmy,’ chuckled Mr. Richard wilily. ‘But you must keep the glass quiet,’ he added, remembering the scene which awaited the young scamps round the corner; ‘because if you talk about it, your shillings will have to go to pay for the damage. Now I’m off to wait for old Nickens. We’ll give him some other dance another time, eh? Good-night.’

Two minutes later Mr. Richard was breathing more freely in the moving maze of the Mile End Road; and as he walked westward, waiting for a City-bound omnibus to overtake him, he reflected upon the fruits of the adventure of the evening.

‘Well, Mr. Nickens,’ he mused, ‘I am much obliged to you for knocking your fellow-ruffian down. If you hadn’t done that I shouldn’t have known which of you was which. As it is, your cursing was the cursing of the master of the establishment, and I think I shall know you again wherever I may see you. Who your other scamp may be I don’t know, and I may have to find out; but at present I rather fancy his interests will be confined to the nearest hospital, and his opportunities for immediate mischief will thereby be necessarily curtailed. As for yourself, Mr. Nickens, you are not the man to plan big jewel robberies, and if you have had a hand in them there is somebody behind you, and I must see if I cannot discover who that somebody is. To-night, Mr. Nickens, I don’t think I need trouble any further about you, for the good reason that you will be too much afraid that the police are shadowing you; and that uncomfortable uncertainty will keep you from indulging in your usual little practices. So I think I may digest a good

dinner, and smoke a quiet cigar at the Empire afterwards. I have earned both.'

Then Mr. Richard took a seat in a passing bus, and as he rumbled westward, Mr. Bill Sharples was removed to the London Hospital, as he himself had once anticipated would be the case, with a broken skull.

CHAPTER XIII

FROM ELYSIAN POETRY TO DOCKSIDE PROSE

WHEN the Honourable Basil left his room at the Royal Hotel on the morning following his adventure at Southampton Dock the *East Anglia* was already breasting her way up the Channel to the mouth of the Thames. Some time later she had steamed up the river, and before dusk she had reached the water-gates of the East India Docks. By the time darkness had fallen she had been hauled into the basin, and had been comfortably berthed alongside the South Africa Wharf.

Meanwhile the Honourable Basil had returned to town. His breakfast had been brief, his study of the morning papers had been still briefer, and his negotiatory calls on behalf of the syndicate of which he was the ambassador had been accomplished with a minimum expenditure of time, and with, apparently, a maximum amount of success. His mental condition seemed, nevertheless, to be under the control of two imperious forces, which

swayed him like a pendulum between the points of two extremes. In company he appeared to be the embodiment of easy satisfaction ; alone with his own reflections, the knitting of his brows and the concentration of his thoughtfulness seemed to suggest the state of a man beset with the difficulty of making a choice of one of several lines of action, and perturbed by the naturally anxious desire to make choice of the best.

Perhaps his overnight adventure at Southampton had caused this peculiar disturbance of his mental equilibrium. Certain it was that the packet which he had found on board the *East Anglia* lay under the lock and key of his table drawer, within reach of his hand ; and certain also it was that he seemed to find a difficulty in speaking to anybody about it. Possibly he was puzzled to determine what best to do with his fortuitous possession. Lunch apparently did not assist him to solve the problem, and in the early afternoon he dressed and left the house, intimating to the Honourable Mrs. Basil that the delight of his companionship at dinner need not be expected by the household.

He took the road Cityward, carrying in his hand nothing more than his umbrella. But cautiousness stands sentinel in every man's brain, and to avoid possible mischances he carried in the

pocket of his overcoat the packet from the steamship *East Anglia*.

In these evidences of mental awryness there seemed to be signs that the day with the Honourable Basil was one of perverse inequality. But for Mr. Richard the day was one neither of rough excrescences nor of provoking disturbances. Miss Cissie Rowley had gilded the morning for him by graciously permitting him to hoop with gold a certain finger of a certain hand. She had even permitted him to kiss her as a reward for his self-imposed trouble ; and, if the truth must be told, as it should be in a world which depends so much upon it for peace and happiness, she had even gone to the length of kissing him on her own account. In any case, when Mr. Richard left Chelsea Gardens he was in a rarefied state of elation.

‘What did the pater say, Dick?’ Miss Cissie had coyly asked.

‘What did he say, Cissie?’ responded Mr. Dick handsomely. ‘Why, he said that you were one of the best little girls in the world——’

‘Yes?’

‘And that if I were your choice he wouldn’t stand in the way of it,’ added Mr. Dick mon-archically.

‘Dear old pater!’ commented Miss Cissie

appreciatively. 'But, Dick,' she added, with demure slyness, 'I hope he hasn't made you grow another inch.'

'Another inch — why?' inquired Mr. Dick, slightly mystified.

'Well,' she explained sensibly, 'I don't want to have to tip-toe to reach your moustache, you know.'

'Oh, that's it, is it?' he laughed, giving her a possessive squeeze. 'Well, I can stoop, you know, if necessary.'

'I thought it was always "She Stoops to Conquer," Dick,' she observed, with correction.

'Well, you have conquered, Cissie,' he laughed again.

'Then I think you had better stoop,' she said quizzically; and, lifting her lips with a pretty pout, she kissed him.

'Now,' she resumed, 'tell me what the pater said about you. Was he very nice and complimentary?'

'Well,' mused Mr. Dick in humorously wry deliberation, 'to me he was very nice, but—well, you see, Cissie, he and my pater seem to be a little antipathetic. We all have our tastes, and I suppose it is just a little case of sentiment, for which neither of them could really account. They don't quite hit it together; that's about all. But, as

Sir George said, the son is not the father. He was good enough to say that he had observed me, and liked me very well ; so that if all other things are satisfactory, he will consider only your happiness, and he hopes that we'll make a happy match of it. How do you like that, Cissie ?

'I like it well enough to be very glad, Dick,' she said simply.

Then the moment came to draw the veil of sanctity. There is an instant in the lives of all lovers when they soar to a height in love's empyrean which they may never reach again. Dick took Cicely in his arms. They did not speak ; the music of all the love that ever was since Adam sat with Eve in Eden, listening to the Voice, entranced their senses. Life became a spell of sweetness and softness—a tender fragrance, a pause which filled itself with things unspeakable. Their lips sipped the divine honey of the gods.

And the memory of this brief but blissful intoxication Mr. Richard carried with him throughout the remainder of the day.

Nevertheless, his secret ecstasy in no way disordered his mental faculties. On the contrary, having now acquired a personal right in the possession of Miss Cicely Rowley, he felt a greatly increased interest in the desirability of insuring that

she should safely receive her diamonds from the Cape. The offer of Guston to wager that the gems would suffer misadventure had been seed which had not fallen upon the stony ground of his mind, and, with the *East Anglia* in port, it was now producing a crop of pesky uncertainty. There should be no fear as to the security of the gems, yet he could not feel assured that their safety was beyond doubt. Mr. Samuel Nickens, as a factor in the criminal system, was altogether too recent an addition to his experience to allow his confidence to remain undisturbed. Certain of his overnight reflections, moreover, returned to augment his uneasiness. He had ranked Mr. Nickens as an inferior craftsman in the trade of engineering roguery. Necessarily and logically this classification implied, as he had already conjectured, the possible existence of a head which was superior to the cranium of Mr. Nickens—a head which probably guided and directed all Mr. Nickens's rascally movements. If Mr. Guston was right in his theory that someone having cognizance of society's jewels had been the organizer of the many recent robberies, there was nothing extravagant in the suggestion that the unknown arch-scamper might have knowledge of the diamonds which Sir George Rowley was expecting from the Cape ; in which case—what

if Mr. Nickens was an agent of the superior rogue?

Being at the Law Courts, Mr. Richard obtained a London Directory, and, spreading wide its map of the Metropolis, he traced his finger along the sinuous course of the Thames until it paused at the narrow blue neck which marked the entrance to the East India Docks. Close against the channel was the thin, black indicatory line of a railway, and Mr. Richard traced it Cityward until it came to an end at Fenchurch Street Station.

‘That will do, I think,’ he remarked with satisfaction. ‘If the map does not lie, the end of that line at the dock is a terminus, and that terminus is Blackwall Station. Outside Blackwall Station, by all appearance, is a hard which obligingly prevents the trains from running into the river. That hard and the dock-gates seem to me to be as much attached to each other as the Siamese twins. If the *East Anglia* has not come up the river yet, I can stand there and see her come in. After that I must be guided by circumstances. At any rate, I’ll make certain of Cissie’s getting her diamonds, if there’s any chance of making certain of it.’

Having arrived at this decision, Mr. Richard left the Courts, hailed a hansom, and hastened to Cadogan Terrace, where he exchanged his frock-

coat and silk hat for a lounge jacket and a felt billycock, astutely deeming the latter to be more likely to harmonize inconspicuously with the surroundings of Blackwall than the regulation raiment of Piccadilly. He was not displeased by the discovery that the Honourable Basil had just departed for the City, and that the Honourable Mrs. Basil, accompanied by Miss Nibs, had gone forth, with that heroism of which only the feminine nature is capable, to voluntarily submit themselves to some fashionable martyrdom. By this happy combination of circumstances he was enabled to leave the house in his metamorphosed state unperceived—even by the servants, who naturally took advantage of the absence of superiority to permit themselves the enjoyment of the lordliest relaxation.

Mr. Richard, wishing to avoid observation in his present shape, and desiring to escape detention by inquisitive acquaintances, chose to travel by the District Railway from Sloane Square to Mark Lane. From Mark Lane he passed to Fenchurch Street Station, and from Fenchurch Street Station he went by a stocky train to Blackwall.

This region of Blackwall was to him a *terra incognita*, and he surveyed it with novel and almost indefinable interest. The name of Blackwall did not savour of poetry and loveliness ; and as

he stood upon the esplanade between the railway-station and the river, his æsthetic self seemed to become a shadowy and conversational companion to his bodily self, and to pronounce the place most aptly named. The spot seemed to be a No Man's Land, or, at least, a land of men of a type apart from all others. The uncouthness and ruggedness of the sea appeared to have found its way hither. Everything was dingy, wind-swept, and weather-worn. The very station wore the prosaic likeness of the briny grime of the commerce and handicraft of ships, and revelled internally in the gloom of a hulk's hold. Beyond the dock-gates, lower down the river, straggled black squat sheds, entangled with straddling giant tripods, bare-ribbed slips, splaying cranes, and sprawling gears ; and over all hung the strident clangour of ships' smiths driving rivets home into maritime carcasses of mail. From the station, spreading up the river, the same utilitarian unloveliness, the same scramble of furnace and workshop, the same murky congeries of mechanical mammoths, the same hum of Titans and Vulcans in labour. Flat sailing barges pushed their low, stubby noses through the dull, sulky water ; a fussy little tug snorted and churned its way against the stream, with a double string of inky coal-lighters clinging and wallowing at its tail ; and across the river the flats of the Kentish

shore loomed through the mist, damp, drear, disconsolate.

The hull of a liner coming up the river bulked through the furthestmost grayness. At brief intervals she hooted weirdly with her siren, as if she were endowed with a second sight of her own, and were giving deep-throated signals and warnings to things unseen by other eyes. Men began to gather in preparation at the dock-head, and the outer water-gate began to mysteriously open inward. A few minutes later the long wall of the ship swung athwart the fairway, her propellers churning the water petulantly. Rope-lines hurtled between the vessel and the shore, windlasses began to spin, straining hawsers to creak and groan; and Richard Markham saw the leviathan *East Anglia* being slowly warped and hauled into dock.

He had passed through the foot-gate at the side of the railway-station into the dock, and he now stood on the lock-side, surveying the majestic steamship from end to end with curious interest. The forms and faces of the two men who were standing high and clear on the vessel's bridge fascinated his attention, not so much because they embodied and expressed the confident skill of man upon the trackless deep, as because he wondered what association he might

yet have with them, although at that moment they stood aloft before him, unnoticing and unknown.

Something freakish in his brain persisted in conjuring into various vague forms the possibility of mischief.

CHAPTER XIV

STEPHEN ELGARTH AND HIS MYSTERIES

‘THE best “fence” in London,’ as the late Mr. Custer had been pleased to describe his knavish patron, was entitled to the distinction of possessing all the other oblique excellences which the compliment may have been intended to include and imply. An invisible witness might have chanced to become cognizant of his closely-kept dealings with Mr. Custer, but that witness could never have discovered in what manner, if at all, he had been affected by Mr. Custer’s death. When Stephen Elgarth chose that his face should reveal the courses of his mind, daylight itself could not be more transparent ; but the Sphinx was not more inscrutable than his countenance when his thoughts and purposes were of the kind to need the wearing of a mask.

In the seclusion of his own haunts he fully realized that for him these were eventful and possibly fateful days. Although no cryptic script

of his had been brought to light at the inquest on the body of Joseph Custer, he felt therefrom no strengthening of his confidence, but rather an augmentation of his uneasiness. His acute mind found no difficulty in formulating the sequence and logic of events. Joseph Custer had lost the message of the diamonds, and, dying, the missive had not been found, either upon his body or within his house. This latter fact was proof that Joseph Custer had not recovered the latter before his death. It was also proof that the message was still lost, or was still in the possession of the person by whom it had been found. Stephen Elgarth had no uncertainty in making a choice between these two possibilities. With unfaltering acumen he inferred the finder of the script to have discovered that Joseph Custer was the owner of it. The finder of the message, by force of deduction, was the probable slayer of Joseph Custer.

But this conclusion was not the final point in Stephen Elgarth's process of reasoning. He considered the purpose of the slaying.

If the message had been lost at Da Costa's saloon, it had had every chance of being found by a member of the confraternity to which Mr. Custer belonged. A thief, in such circumstances, would instantly have his curiosity aroused. Furthermore, he would be better equipped than the honest with

ingenuity for applying tests to discover the cryptic letter's hidden meaning. By process of lucky stumbling he had possibly found the key to the message.

And what then?

Stephen Elgarth went with precision to his final conclusion. The finder of the message had seen the desperate temper of Joe Custer interposed between himself and his successful hauling of the spoil, and he had, therefore, given Joe Custer his quietus.

Very well, the one thing remaining to Mr. Elgarth was to take Joseph Custer's place. He anathematized Joseph Custer for a loose-fingered fool, just as he had cursed him in the wood at Snaresbrook; but he still went steadily forward with his preparations for taking Joseph Custer's place at the docks.

At seven o'clock on the evening of the arrival of the *East Anglia* in the East India Dock, Stephen Elgarth dined at the Lancaster Hotel in Aldersgate Street; and an hour later he crossed from the hotel to Jewin Street, which thoroughfare already wore the aspect of having laid down work for the day.

But Mr. Elgarth was a scientist in caution. Jewin Street was as the string to the bow of Jewin Crescent; yet he walked the whole length of the

straight thoroughfare before he entered the one with the curve, and even then he entered the Crescent at the end which was most distant from his place of destination. This was his double method of eluding observation, and of making survey to satisfy himself that his path was free from police, and that his person was not under espionage, whether of a following detective or of a personal acquaintance, who might have chanced to wander into the neighbourhood, and to have had his curiosity aroused as to the object of his presence there.

The eyes of Stephen Elgarth saw everything, and he seemed to know by instinct whether danger lurked in the persons and the objects which he beheld.

He entered the Crescent at its eastern end, and then made his way in business-like motion towards its western outlet. The place was deserted for the night, but it was the purpose of Mr. Elgarth to appear like a belated man of commerce briskly betaking himself homeward. He reached the door of No. 113, with his key already palmed in his hand; and, almost without a pause, he disappeared.

The light of a near gas-lamp flickered upon the door-post of the house which he had entered, and dimly revealed the painted names of 'Cambers

and Burrs, Dressing-Bag and Portmanteau Manufacturers,' and 'Stephen Elgarth, Foreign Agent, Third Floor.' At one time, as was apparent from the structure of the houses, Jewin Crescent had been a residential street; but now the march of the City's commerce had driven domesticity from the spot, and the odours of meats had given place to the smells of business.

The house which Stephen Elgarth had entered smelt of leather and glue and the heat of tooling-irons. All the doors of the rooms which were tenanted by the firm of Cambers and Burrs were closely barred and padlocked, and the house itself was sepulchral in its darkness and silence. Nevertheless, Stephen Elgarth abated none of his cautiousness. He locked the street-door as noiselessly as he had unlocked it, and he softly felt his way up the stairs to his room on the third floor. Here he produced another key, and, opening the door, he entered the apartment.

The faint light from the street dimly revealed the outlines of the room, but Mr. Elgarth apparently desired none of it. He first enveloped his hands in a pair of black gloves, the gauntlets of which effectually covered the white margin of his shirt-cuffs. Next he covered his head and shoulders with a black cashmere shawl, having two slits in it for eye-holes; and then he cautiously

approached the window, and scrutinized the windows of the houses upon the opposite side of the street, and even the pavement at their foot in the causeway below. Being satisfied with his reconnoitring, he took a thick black travelling rug and suspended it across the window; then he struck a match and lit the gas.

Thus illuminated, Mr. Elgarth's office-room presented nothing to the eye that could excite suspicion, or that could differentiate it from any other modest office within the bounds of the City. In the centre of the room was a writing-table, bearing every sign of commercial legitimacy. The floor was covered with linoleum and carpet, and three or four chairs were disposed against the wall for the accommodation of clients and visitors who should chance to make business calls upon the occupier. Against the wall opposite the fireplace was a large cabinet, above it being an upright glass case, with shelves displaying specimens of machine fittings, cardboard boxes containing samples of soap, bottles of mineral oils, and other products of manufacture. Upon the walls were various oleographic advertisement placards. One displayed the name of 'Guntz and Snyder, Engineers, Berlin'; another flourished the style of 'Heintz and Ullmann, Soap Manufacturers, Coblenz'; and yet another announced the title of

‘Roubillon et Cie., Parfumeurs, Paris.’ Other prints did justice to firms at Vienna and St. Petersburg, from which latter city probably came the specimen bottles of mineral oils.

Of all these foreign enterprises in the domain of commerce, Mr. Elgarth was by inference the British commission agent. That he found profit in his agency was also to be deduced, inasmuch as in the recess between the fireplace and the window was an apparently well-used letter-press. In the corresponding recess, between the fireplace and the rearward wall of the room, was a still more impressive confirmation of his substantial business, in the shape of an iron safe, standing upon a square, solid-looking pedestal.

Mr. Elgarth’s first act after lighting the gas was to stoop over the firegrate, from which he removed the knobs of asbestos which it contained with methodical despatch. This task being satisfactorily accomplished, he deftly removed the fireclay back of the grate, disclosing a cavity, from which he withdrew a winch-key. With this innocent-looking instrument he passed to the pedestal supporting the safe, in front of which he knelt in an attitude of prostrate humility, worthy of any pious Moslem with his face bowed towards Mecca. Passing the key through the thick crossbars of the stand, and fixing it to some invisible pivot, he began to turn

its handle; and then was witnessed the weird phenomenon of a massive safe so far forgetting its settled dignity as to abandon itself to the skittish antic of changing its position. In short, it began to descend, and continued so to do so long as Mr. Elgarth proceeded with his mystic rite of turning the handle.

Presently, when he had well and truly performed this part of his curious ceremonial, Mr. Elgarth rose from his knees, and, going to that area of the wall which the descent of the safe had laid bare, he achieved the further magic of causing the exposed space to reveal a small opening in the wall itself. Into the cavity to which this aperture gave admittance he passed something which he took from his overcoat pocket, as if, in the manner of those who deal with rogues that break in and steal, he intended it to 'sweat' there until he should have an opportunity of safely disposing of it.

In all these mysteries Mr. Elgarth acquitted himself with admirable method and despatch, never casting about unsystematically, never going over the same ground twice. A few moments later the safe was restored to its former elevation, and the winch-key was replaced in its ingenious hermitage. Then Mr. Elgarth replenished the grate with the asbestos, and, setting light to the

gas-jets beneath its bars, he was speedily rewarded for his painstaking labours with a kindling fire.

Apparently his composure became perfect when once these initial tasks were complete. If ever the representatives of a paternal Government developed a curious desire to study his safe, it would always be ready to meet their inspection. He knew that its stand was so ingeniously designed to wear the appearance of immovable solidity that they would never dream of the possibility of its masking a hiding-place in the wall. Nor would they ever have to drag it from its position in order to break it open.

Whatever other extravagance he might be guilty of, he did not waste his money in buying burglar-proof safes. His safe, although it was made to wear a front comparable with the best of its kind, was of a cheap and worthless type; and, in his absence, it could easily be opened by any inquisitor having in his possession the usual assortment of professional keys.

For this reason he reposed in absolute confidence, so far as the inquisitiveness of burglars was concerned. He was well aware that the Knights of the Jemmy, if baffled in the use of keys, would not hesitate to drag the safe from its position in order to operate upon it wherever it might show a possibly weak spot in front, sides,

or rear ; but he knew that his safe would not baffle their keys ; and, therefore, as they would have no need to move it for the purpose of examining it more closely, he had an unruffled faith in the safety of the valuables which he entrusted to the keeping of his simple contrivance in the wall.

Not so secure from liability to discovery was another of Mr. Elgarth's devices. This piece of ingenuity was a chest standing against the wall beneath the window. Having disposed of his business with the locker in the wall, Mr. Elgarth proceeded to turn the chest bottom upward. In appearance the under part of this trunk in no wise differed from the bottom of any chest having a structural integrity placing it beyond suspicion and reproach ; but Mr. Elgarth, with adroit persuasiveness, induced it to falsify its seeming honesty by unmasking itself of a superfluous bottom, which it unmistakably employed to conceal the presence of a shallow space beneath.

This secret space was almost like a wizard's box for the necromantic variety and number of its contents, inasmuch as from its apparently self-renewing store Mr. Elgarth proceeded to entirely change his external personality. In a few moments he stood clothed in slop apparel of pilot-cloth, a rough twill shirt, with dux collar and sailor's knot,

and a pair of unpolished boots completing his costume.

But he had not yet exhausted the magic of his upturned trunk. Taking next a mirror and a couple of jars from its universal store, he proceeded to survey himself in the glass, and to tan his face and neck to his critical satisfaction. Then he bestowed attention upon his hands, finally imparting to them an appearance of brown, horny grime which would have procured for any genuine shipman a certificate of recent strenuous industry. Lastly, by means of a sturdy use of some potent composition, which in its appearance was not unlike a cake of soap, he succeeded in entirely changing the colour of his hair and beard into a tint which was nearly related to the hue of muddy flax. Two whisks of hair of the same shade, deftly attached to his beard, broadened that facial adornment into a spade-like shape; and, with a pilot-cap set upon his head, he again looked into the mirror, and was satisfied that he would not know himself in the reflection which he beheld.

Having bestowed his cast-off clothes and eccentric cosmetics in the foundation of his trunk, Mr. Elgarth quickly restored the room to its characteristic state. Then he deposited a live-preserver and three unmarked handkerchiefs in the inner

pocket of his coat, and having extinguished the gas, he removed the screening-rug from the window as carefully as he had placed it there. Finally, he locked the door of the room behind him, and crept downstairs to the ground-floor. There he listened intently for some moments, and, hearing no sound in the street without, he at last ventured to softly open the door, and to cast a rapid glance up and down the Crescent. In another instant the door was locked behind him, and he was striding rapidly towards the east. He chose the way of Fore Street and Finsbury Circus, and reaching Liverpool Street Station, he paid his fare to Tidal Basin.

By a quarter-past ten o'clock Mr. Elgarth stood in that strange, laborious, and meagre wilderness which forms the human fringe to the Ultima Thule of the London Docks—that vague region of warehouse and waterway, ship-mast and truck-line, iron-yard and tackle ground, which ranges maze-wise from Blackwall to Barking Road, from Barking Road to Canning Town, from Canning Town to Tidal Basin, and from Tidal Basin to North Woolwich.

Mr. Elgarth crossed the railway by the station bridge, and continued his way through several dim, nondescript streets, until he reached a thoroughfare which was defined on one side by

a row of puny dwellings, and on the other by a line of black plank fencing. Here he searched for a spot conveniently dark and quiet, and, having found it, he removed his boots and slipped his feet into a pair of canvas shoes with rubber soles. The brown paper which had contained the shoes he roughly bound round his boots with a piece of string; the bundle thus formed he quietly threw over the fence. Then he stepped backward some eight or nine paces. The next moment he made a running leap at the fence, and topped it with a straddle as nimble as the upward spring of a cat. Then he lightly dropped to the ground beyond the fence, to rejoin the company of his boots, which he had in no wise cast away in final abandonment. His first proceeding, indeed, was to select a convenient place for their concealment until he should have need of them again; and having presently disposed of them to his satisfaction, he steered his way through ebonized mounds of furnace slag and blackened heaps of scrap-iron towards the boundary fence of the East India Docks.

A few minutes later he had passed the barrier, and had taken his stand amid the weird, brooding silences of the ghostlike vessels and the shadowy quays, his eyes and ears alert to detect the lurking presence of the dockyard police.

‘Now, Mr. Whoever-you-may-be,’ he muttered, as he crept towards the South Africa Quay, ‘you won’t come after the hour given in the ticket, and you won’t come a long time before it ; but you’ll come as much before eleven as you think will give you a chance of managing a scoop, in order to get in front of us, and to leave us a nest cleared of the eggs. Joe Custer being dead, you’ll be pretty certain of our tackling the business ourselves. Well, I think we shall be in good time to astonish you ; and if you leave this place alive will depend upon circumstances, else my name’s not—— Ha!’

For a moment Stephen Elgarth stood crouching and staring. Then he pressed forward as rapidly as the necessity for wariness would permit towards the mute area of the South Africa Quay.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAGEDY OF THE DOCKS

A WIDE prospect of the unknown lay outspread before Richard Markham as he looked upon the *East Anglia* being slowly hauled to her moorings alongside the South Africa Quay. The outlook being one in a world of which he was the sole inhabitant, none but himself could explore it. He was ready to begin the task, but his immediate difficulty was the problem of determining in which direction he should proceed.

Two courses at present appeared to be open to him ; he could either board the vessel and introduce himself to its captain, or he could bestow himself in a place of concealment, within viewing distance of the ship, and keep a watchful eye upon the quay in anticipation of eventualities.

The latter of these alternatives, by reason of its spice of possible adventure, was by far the more alluring to his fancy. Ships' captains were strange dogs, and this fellow of the *East Anglia* might

have no more humour and perspicacity than a grampus. Mr. Richard's vivid imagination, indeed, led him to conceive an unsatisfactory conversation with the captain, couched in the following strain :

The Captain : ' Want me, do you? Well, my man, what's your name?'

Himself : ' Richard Markham.'

The Captain : ' Richard Markham, is it? Don't know it on my chart. What can I do for you?'

Himself : ' Well, Captain, I believe you have some diamonds on board, which——'

The Captain (with suspicion) : ' Oh! diamonds is it? Anything else?'

Himself : ' Only that I thought it would be well to let you know that there's a possibility of an attempt being made to steal them.'

The Captain : ' I could have told you that. I'm not running without a light in the binnacle. What are your bearings, mister?'

Himself : ' I don't know that I've any particular bearings, but perhaps I may explain that I'm engaged to Miss Rowley, Sir George Rowley's daughter. You will have no doubts, perhaps, if I mention the names?'

The Captain (testingly) : ' Got your manifest?'

Himself : ' Manifest?'

The Captain (with increased suspicion): 'Yes—ship's papers, mister, proving your *bonâ fides*.'

Himself: 'No, I haven't any papers.'

The Captain: 'You haven't, eh? Well, my fine fellow, I reckon I fix all my dead-lights when I'm running in dirty weather, and I guess those blazin' diamonds will keep safe till the right man comes for them in the morning. Now, you'd better clear—understand me?—clear, and be pretty spry about it. I don't have any blackbirds on board my ship.'

Finally, Mr. Richard could imagine himself ignominiously descending the overside gangway, followed by the captain's strident voice, trumpeting some such phrase as: 'Ahoy, there! Oblige me by seeing this man out of the dock, will you?'

Such a climax as that of being accorded the distinction of being regarded as a personage of suspicious character was one which Mr. Richard could not for a moment permit himself to contemplate. He perceived that, in the event of his being ingloriously marched from the dock, several of the incidental schemes which occupied and engaged his brain must suffer total disaster. Mr. Nickens, for instance, was to him still an object of unusual interest. The manner in which he had become aware of the fact that such a person as Mr.

Nickens had an undesirable existence was itself peculiar.

Certain freakish incentives had led to his taking an interest in the murder of Mr. Joseph Custer.

Mr. Custer had been proved to have been a prince of jewel thieves.

At the moment of his death Mr. Custer had been strenuously in search of a document which was evidently to him of urgent and peculiar importance.

During a period of his career Mr. Custer had had an associate in the person of one Mr. Samuel Nickens.

Since Mr. Custer's death Mr. Samuel Nickens, in a moment of headlong flight, had unknowingly revealed himself to Mr. Richard Markham as a scamp of the first magnitude.

Mr. Samuel Nickens had been genuinely alarmed, and it was not beyond the bounds of legitimate hypothesis to wonder whether Mr. Nickens was responsible for Mr. Custer's death, whether he was in possession of Mr. Custer's lost document, and whether he was a jewel thief of such a calibre as to be likely, under superior direction or otherwise, to attempt the theft of the Rowley diamonds upon being apprised of their presence on board the steamship *East Anglia*.

All these considerations were significant ; and

although he had for the moment allowed Mr. Nickens to rest from the pursuit of his active inquiry, while he devoted himself to the possible service of Miss Cissie Rowley's diamonds, he was not at all sure that the knowledge of Mr. Nickens's existence, in combination with the other discoveries which he had made since his visit to Bevis Marks, had not largely influenced his course of action, and had not insensibly induced his immediate presence in the East India Docks.

Mr. Richard permitted himself to imagine the possibility of Mr. Nickens's appearing at the dock. In that event he might obtain light upon many hidden things. He might discover how and by whom Joseph Custer had been murdered. He might ascertain the nature of the document of which Joseph Custer had been so diligently in search at the time of his death. He might even penetrate the mystery of the manner in which the Leslie jewels and other vanished gems had been made to disappear.

With these thoughts occupying his mind Mr. Richard crossed the inner lock-gates, which had been reclosed under the stern of the inhauling vessel, and, in the manner of an interested visitor, passed along the intervening range of stage and shed towards the quay which he ob-

THE TRAGEDY OF THE DOCKS 173

served to be the South Africa section of the dock.

By the time he reached the *East Anglia's* berth, and stood under her towering counter, his course of action was forming itself into definiteness, and was needing only his decision to give it finality. He noted with some interest, as he passed along the ship's side, that two men, whom he had noticed as obviously having no vital interest in the fortunes of the dock, had disappeared. They were not before him, they were not behind him ; nor were they to be seen anywhere around. The overside gangway being already in position, he logically inferred that they had gone on board the vessel. Both men, he had observed, had evinced a curious interest in his own person as they had stood facing him on the opposite side of the lock when the *East Anglia* was being hauled into the basin ; and he now felt himself entitled to favour them with a similar compliment.

Even in this decision he was astutely practical. He strolled along the quays in a direction which he supposed must lead to the road entrance to the docks, but as he passed from point to point he found much that was novel to arrest his progress and to claim his interest. At these moments he invariably found his range of study extended to the steamship *East Anglia* ; and presently he ob-

served his two unknown friends quit the ship and pass expeditiously along the quays towards the lock-gates and Blackwall Station.

This moment was the one for which he had been waiting.

These gentlemen, who had honoured him with so much searching scrutiny, were, he now had no doubt, Sir George Rowley's detectives from Scotland Yard. He felt himself free to construct a hypothesis. They had either arranged the safety of the diamonds, or they had received them for delivery to their rightful owner.

Mr. Richard's course of action instantly received its finality. He had resolved at the outset to be guided by circumstances. Circumstances now seemed to leave his curiosity free to test certain of his nebulous theorizings. Whether his wondering as to the possibility of Mr. Nickens being feloniously interested in the fate of the Rowley diamonds was or was not well inspired could be ascertained only by his staying in the dock to await revelations, if revelations should be forthcoming. So being, then, he would stay.

With this resolve, he looked around him to make good his design. Dusk was already creeping along the quays and across the solitary waters; beyond it, in the distance, was the dimmer form of the coming night. Here and there, upon the

opposite side of the moody flood, lonely-looking lamps were preparing to give their night-light to the docks.

Mr. Richard would have been glad to possess a magic lamp of his own, so that by rubbing it he might provide himself with a feast. He had now fasted for some hours, and he realized that he must contemplate the prospect of hungering for some hours longer.

Outside the dock were probably shops at which he could purchase sandwiches, and taverns at which he could obtain the wherewithal to wash them down ; but he perceived that he could not now leave the dock without risk of being unable to re-enter it. Even if he succeeded in passing out unobserved by the policeman at the gate, which was most improbable, he would have before him the possibility of finding the gate closed when he returned, or of having his entry at the closing hour of business suspiciously challenged.

Making the best of his plight with philosophic stoicism, he prepared to bestow himself in an effective place of concealment. He had been careful to keep himself as unobtrusive as possible ; and now, with a hasty glance around to satisfy himself that no curious eyes were watching his movements, he slipped into the midst of a littered heap of packing-cases, piled at the back of

the open quay, against the high boundary wall of the dock.

He had an object in this manœuvre. Flanking the mound of cases was a low shed, built against the wall of the dock. Surmounting this shed was a ridged roof, so that between the roof and the wall was a little valley of perfect concealment, if only he could succeed in reaching it. By great good fortune he found a large case in the angular corner formed by the junction of shed and wall, and by dint of noiseless climbing he gained the roof of the building. There he lit a cigarette in the curtain of his coat, and proceeded to make himself as comfortable as the exigencies of the situation would permit.

Night fell, and the dock slumbered in dark silence. From his seat on the roof of the shed Markham could see the doleful quay-lamps casting feeble and fitful glimmerings upon the hull of the *East Anglia* as she lay like a sleeping creature of the deep at her berth. He realized that before him was some period of waiting, inasmuch as Mr. Nickens, if he came at all, would not begin his work until an hour of the night that would most favour the success of his thievish undertaking. For that reason he was not sorry that the weather had relinquished its wintry snap, and had taken to itself a humid mildness. His position on

the roof was not Elysian, but it was also not intolerable.

The severest strain upon his endurance was the weariness of time. The creeping hours tediously dragged their slow lengths along, until he at last almost groaned in vicious misery at their crawling. His blood became sluggish and his limbs became cramped. Food he could postpone, but with action he could not dispense.

A neighbouring clock struck the hour of nine.

Three hours had passed since the beginning of his watch, and as yet no stealthy figure had approached the *East Anglia's* gangway.

He welcomed the record with a sigh of relief, if not satisfaction. Mr. Nickens he adjudged to be a careful rascal—a methodical vagabond, who would begin his night's felony by cautiously feeling his way. He doubted whether the process of feeling his way would commend itself to Mr. Nickens before an hour somewhere between nine and ten o'clock, when any stray member of the ship's company staying on board the *East Anglia* would be preferably within cabin instead of on deck.

Although conscious of his own worthiness of motive, Markham had so far refrained from making a nearer approach to the vessel for the same reason. A dozen times or more he had heard the footsteps

of the constable patrolling the quays on his side of the dock passing beneath his place of hiding ; and he had observed the man pause to exchange a word of companionship with some presence on the ship. But at last his hour for action had come. The policeman passed gateward from the steamer, and he quietly slipped from his perch, and stretched his limbs with a fine welcome strain of relaxation.

Then he pressed close against the black wall of the dock and moved with guarded steps towards the South Africa Quay.

Presently he reached the projecting angle of the warehouse, and from that corner-place of vantage he scanned the *East Anglia* with rapid glances from stem to stern. The whole length and breadth of the vessel seemed to be inanimate with slumber. Emboldened by the reconnaissance, he slipped quickly around the corner of the building into the gloom of the open colonnade beneath the superstructure of the warehouse, and then noiselessly groped his way towards a spot from which he could observe the faces of any night prowlers who might chance to approach the gangway to the ship. A few moments later the boat's watch appeared at the head of the gangway, and he slipped behind a pair of crates filled with straw. By deftly parting the litter he contrived to form a loophole through which he could espy the foreground of the wharf

and the full length of the vessel, while he himself remained invisible.

An hour wearily dragged its length along. Thirty minutes toiled slowly in its wake. And then a strange, silent drama was swiftly enacted before his gaze.

A silent figure, on hands and knees, crawled round the riverward corner of the building, and turned into the cavernous gloom of the colonnade. When it reappeared it stood erect within the shadow opposite the foot of the gangway.

Markham recognised the presence of Samuel Nickens.

For some moments Mr. Nickens stood watching and listening; then, with a stealthy stoop, he darted up the gangway to the deck of the ship.

In that brief instant Markham observed that Mr. Nickens was noiseless with bootless feet. Quick with inspiration, he removed his own boots and hastened to follow at Mr. Nickens's heels.

A lucky pause—a happy pause! For, as he softly stepped from behind his screen, a second figure appeared upon the stage—a crouching but less hesitant figure, clothed in a suit of pilot-cloth, and bearded with bushy hair of the colour of muddy flax.

Who was this newcomer—rogue or respectable? Markham's first thought was of a possible detective

from Scotland Yard ; nevertheless, he instinctively returned to his retreat behind the crate.

The new actor in the drama came forward with soundless tread, and Markham observed that he grasped a life-preserver in his hand. With scarcely a pause he sprang up the gangway and disappeared.

Another inspiration came to Markham. Griping his boots as his best available weapons, he started after the last comer the moment he passed from view, bounded up the gangway, and gained the *East Anglia's* deck.

He hazarded his course, speeding first along one dim alley and then along another, his quarry being nowhere to be seen.

His wits, like his feet, were running uncertain tracks, a criss-cross scampering and scouting through the broken ground of urgent ideas. He found himself abaft the vessel, and at fault. He leapt from starboard to port, and sped forward. Then he entered a passage having a bar of light at its distant end and showing a glimpse of a pair of heels flitting into the gloom beyond. He sprang along the alley, and looked into the cabin from which streamed the light. In the instant his wild rapidity went hurling aback in a shock of horror.

On the cabin floor lay a man in a spreading

THE TRAGEDY OF THE DOCKS 181

pool of blood ; and beyond him, where it formed a part of the structured cabin wall, was an open, ransacked locker.

The captain of the *East Anglia* was dead ; and the Rowley diamonds, if in the locker they had been, were gone.

CHAPTER XVI

A GRIM CHASE AND A GRIMMER ENDING

LIFE is clothed in fictions, and in self-deception all men are their own tailors. They sometimes shape a portion of their fanciful cloth to the pattern that they are men who know no fear. It is a self-flattering fallacy, a pleasing make-believe.

The coward and the hero dwell together in every man ; and whether he be brave or contemptible at any crucial moment may depend upon the state of his spleen, or his liver, or upon a hundred other things.

A hungry man has no stomach for fighting ; and at the moment of his discovery of the murdered captain of the *East Anglia* Richard Markham was as hungry as a hunter, and was probably as ravenous as six hunters embodied in one person. The emptiness of his stomach affected his head ; and, as he started at the shock of the vision which he beheld, he was, in a sense, a coward.

At another time he could have faced the raining

shafts of death itself; but in the presence of the still corpse upon the cabin floor there seemed to be an unearthly horror, a released spirit already preparing to start in pursuit of vengeance.

An illuminating ray flashed through his mind, revealing to him his position and all its possible dangers. A stranger on the ship, with no right to be there, and with no apparent reason to explain and justify the honesty of his presence on board, he dare not give alarm. What credence would be given in such circumstances to the tale he would have to tell?

These things sprang into light even with his momentary glance through the cabin door.

He turned and fled; but fled still with the instinctiveness of the hunter.

He followed the course that the quarry had taken, and almost stumbled over the boat's watch, snoring industriously under the starboard bulwarks against the gangway head.

If dread had come to him in one form, it had passed from him in another; for, without fear of detection by any passing constable of the dock, he sprang lightly down the gangway and leapt upon the quay just as Samuel Nickens and the man with the muddy-flax hair turned the riverward corner of the wharf in rapid flight. His glimpse

of their forms was no more than a flash, but it carried with it a revelation.

Samuel Nickens was in strenuous retreat, and the man with the life-preserver was in swift pursuit of him.

What did this strange development mean?

He followed the two men in hot haste, flushed the corner around which they had disappeared, and found himself confronted at a few yards rearward by a high, open-jointed board fence.

Alongside this fence he scramblingly ran from end to end, skirting barrels and rounding cases, but seeing nothing of the chase.

At the limit of the fence he turned, and hastened back upon his course, casting quick, searching glances through the chinks of the boards as he ran.

Near the spot from which he had first started he suddenly came to a dead stand. His eye had caught a glimpse of a scene which gave the signal to his feet to stop.

Through the opening between a pair of the fence boards he dimly beheld two dark figures, one lying prone, the other kneeling at its side, and bending over it. The back of the kneeler was turned towards the fence, and his fingers seemed to be running with expert rapidity over the body of the prostrate form. Once the searcher appeared

to pass something from the breast of his victim into his own coat pocket.

Markham's first instinctive prompting was to shout, but the next moment he conceived the wiser plan of endeavouring to fall unexpectedly upon the marauder.

Once more he silently ran along the side of the fence ; and, as he again approached its riverward end, he threaded his way through a litter of empty casks, instead of skirting it as he had done before. A bend in the wooden warren brought him against the fence, and then the secret of the fugitives' passage through the barrier became revealed. A board at this spot in the fence was loose at its lowermost end, and the runners, in their wild haste, had left it pushed aside.

Markham was through the gap in a moment, and the next instant he was speeding towards the spot upon which he had seen the two dark figures.

When he reached it both of them had vanished.

He hurried onward until he became in danger of losing his bearings amid an intricacy of furnace-slag and scrap-iron ; and then, perceiving the hopelessness of his pursuit, he abandoned it with reluctance and chagrin, and returned to the place of mysterious flitting beside the fence.

No trace of a possible hiding-place was visible. The spot, now that he was free to leisurely examine it, appeared to be the flat top of a waterside bank, having a deep facing of brick wall, the latter being stoutly buttressed at regular intervals with massive wooden piles.

A candle at that moment would have been of more practical service to him than a sovereign, but he dare not attract the curiosity of possible watchmen by making use of a light. In despair of other aid, he dropped upon his knees, and, with seeking fingers and straining eyes, he searched the dark ground upon which the prostrate figure had lain. No discovery rewarded his labour, but once again an inspiration came to him.

He crawled to the edge of the bank, and looked down the face of the steep wall at the black, mysterious water lying sluggish at its foot. It spread away mutely to a similar bank in the distant gloom, with an aspect callous, sombre, secretive.

Was the prostrate figure of a few minutes ago lying in those unrevealing depths?

Awe seemed to take to itself the voice of certitude within him, and to say, 'He is there.'

Markham rose to his feet. His fancy could see the image of a dead man with the face of Samuel Nickens.

For the moment his mind did not employ itself in wondering who the slayer of Samuel Nickens might be ; its vigour was dulled by the grim tragedies of the night. The one thing that he saw through the numbing, fateful blackness was the red light of his own needs.

When he had resolved to remain in the dock he had trusted to fortune to aid him in finding a way out of it. How was he to deliver himself from this weird and gloomy place of bondage ?

The dock itself was impassable ; if he escaped at all the means of leaving must be found upon this side of the fence through which he had passed. The danger of delay was keen. He recognised that at any moment the body of the murdered captain might be found, and that at any instant the hue and cry for his murderer might be raised.

By way of the water, past the outer river-gate of the dock, he dare not go, even if fortune were to guide him to a boat which would serve to carry him to the water-stairs of the Blackwall railway esplanade. In that quarter lay three risks : the last train might be gone ; the hue and cry might be already there ; and from such a station at such an hour of the night he might be the only passenger.

His only way of deliverance was that which he might hope to find in the direction which the man with the muddy-flax hair must have taken.

The maze of scrap-iron and furnace-slag once more became his uncertain groping-place. To his fancy it seemed to be like the fantastic refuse-place of a black world, and to have no end ; but presently he reached the mute line of a night-endarkened fence. He saw the glimmerings of niggardly street-lamps, and he hailed them with thankfulness.

In a few moments he again stood in his boots ; and then he listened, with his ear against the fence, for the sounds of passing feet.

All the world seemed well asleep.

He climbed the barrier with noiseless foot, and, with a cordial sense of relief, he dropped into the road beyond.

Into what toilsome wilderness he had fallen he had no knowledge ; but he accepted the disconsolate-looking streets as they came one by one, and tramped a dim mile in a vague direction, which he hoped would lead him westward. He trusted to fortune, and fortune favoured him. Presently the lights of a railway-station beckoned him with flickering encouragement. He entered the booking-hall, and found himself at Canning Town,

with one minute to spare before the departure of the last train to the City.

Long abstention from food demanded its penalty. Markham felt faint and exhausted ; and he sat in the train as it rumbled to Liverpool Street in a state of lassitude, dull, and almost unthinking.

And, while the dark hue of murder impressed Markham's torpor, Stephen Elgarth again made his way towards Jewin Crescent, being in his appearance a new man. His face wore its own complexion, his whiskers of beard were bestowed in his pocket, and his cap was set with a rakish tilt on the side of his head.

Behind him, weighted with stones, and lying in the bed of the creek at Tidal Basin, were three unmarked handkerchiefs, the sponges and towels with which he had effected his cunning transformation. Even the wadded pad that had given a queer hump to his right shoulder had disappeared.

If any curious observer had seen a man with muddy-flax hair set forth eastward, no curious observer had seen a man with muddy-flax hair return.

The ritual of Stephen Elgarth with window, safe, and trunk when he returned to Jewin Crescent was the same as it had been at an earlier

hour of the night ; and when he flitted from the house, clothed as when he had first entered it, he took his way homeward, to await such developments of fortune as daylight might bring forth.

CHAPTER XVII

CHANGING FORTUNES AND SOME UNEASINESS

THE interest of Miss Nellie Markham in things mundane and supernal had become greatly freshened since the development of certain new phases in her own existence. Her temperament was normally bright and joyous, and she was a very excellent specimen of the genus woman. She had no morbid ideas: she regarded the world with relish; and now that the world had admitted her to the privilege of possessing her own Adonis she abundantly revelled in its excellences. She was worthily accusable of frankly loving Lord Bob, and Lord Robert Leslie—to designate him with full honour—was chargeable with healthily loving her in return.

These were things as they should be.

Miss Nibs and Lord Bob, being each other's jewels at that interesting moment of heart-exchanging romance, were sublimely independent of any merely terrestrial treasures. All the world

might have its Golcondas, its Ophirs, its King Solomon's Mines, so far as they were concerned. They dwelt in a temporarily etherealized paradise, in which gems were superabundant; and purely material wealth — the wealth of pearls and diamonds, rubies and emeralds, sapphires and amethysts, about which unsentimental people worried, and all which they locked in safes — troubled them not in the least.

Nevertheless, there were moments when Miss Nibs and Lord Bob, for various earthly and wholly despotic reasons, had to descend from the region of sublimity to the domain of matter-of-fact.

Such a moment was the Saturday afternoon which followed the adventurous excursion of Mr. Richard to the East India Docks. Lord Bob waited upon Miss Nibs at Cadogan Terrace, kissed her with the *devoir* becoming to a devoted cavalier, and thereafter showed in his face a certain subdued state of mind. He let her hands fall, and as he turned to seat himself by her side he also let fall, in something of an undertone, the words, 'Hail, Marchioness!'

'Marchioness!' she repeated, studying him with searching puzzlement. 'Bobby, you goose! what do you mean?'

'I mean just what I have said, Nibbie—or,

perhaps, I should have said "Marchioness that shall be,"' returned Bobby thoughtfully.

'Now, look here, Bob,' commented Miss Nibs monitorially. 'I expect you to say all sorts of nice things to me, not to talk to me in riddles.' And, having made this speech of admonition, Miss Nibs took Lord Bob by the chin and turned his face until she looked full into his eyes.

His response was a kiss.

'Then I won't, dear,' he added. 'I thought perhaps you would guess; but the truth is, poor old Geof is dead.'

'Geoffrey dead!' exclaimed Miss Nibs with widening eyes.

'I am afraid so, Nibbie,' he confirmed regretfully. 'I received the cable just before lunch, and I fear there is very little doubt about it.'

'What was it?' inquired Miss Nibs gently, meaning thereby the cause of death.

'A tiger, it seems. He was up-country, shooting, apparently; but the cable was very short. The full particulars are coming by the mail. Poor old Geof!' he broke off thoughtfully. 'He was a brick, Nibbie, in a way which only brothers who have been chums can understand. There wasn't too much difference in our ages to divide us—only a year and a month or two—and the result was we were always together—in mischief

and otherwise. Poor old chap! he got me out of many a scrape; and it hurts me more than a little, Nibbie, to know that I shall never see him again. I should have never envied him the advantages of being the elder son; but now, I suppose, I must wear the honours.'

Honours! Marchioness! Miss Nibs was a woman, and a warm glow thrilled her bosom. She placed her hands on Lord Bob's shoulders and looked at him gently.

'Bobby,' she said softly, 'if you have lost a brother you loved, you have found a wife to help fill the place.'

'That's true, Nibbie, and yet not true,' he mused, kissing her again. 'The affection for poor old Geof still stands; what you do, little woman, is to grow round it like ivy—and take up a lot of new ground.'

She was stroking his hair in a soft, curious, almost motherly way as he spoke.

'Bobby,' she said warmly, as he finished, 'you are a good boy! That was poetry. Did you know it?'

'I don't know that I knew it, Nibbie,' he answered candidly; 'but I felt it.'

They were silent for some moments, and when the pause ended it was the voice of Miss Nibs that banished the silence.

‘I wish we could have been in India to see poor Geoffrey,’ she said sincerely.

‘So do I,’ he rejoined thoughtfully. ‘What an English sepulchre that India is!’

Then came another pause.

‘Nibbie,’ he resumed presently, ‘do you know, I am sorry now that we have lost our jewels. The robbery didn’t trouble me so much at the time, because I never thought then that they would ever come into my charge. As heirlooms they were in Geoffrey’s trust for life ; but now that the trust reverts to me, I am sorry that I shall not have the privilege of holding them in safe keeping. You will be Marchioness of Gainsford, you know, Nibbie ; and I should have liked to see you queen of the Leslie jewels. How glorious you would have looked in them!’ he concluded in visionary admiration. ‘I should have been proud of my Marchioness!’

‘Your Marchioness!—oh, Bobby!’ Queen of a noble heritage, prospective mother of a noble line! The painfulness of the happiness was too great for her, and, resting her cheek upon Bobby’s shoulder, Miss Nibbie let the glistening tears well into her eyes.

From all which it will be seen that Miss Nibbie was, artificial restraint and social convention notwithstanding, an unspoiled daughter of Eve,

worthy of the immemorial comfort, originated by Adam, which Lord Bobby solicitously bestowed upon her.

Miss Nibbie was thinking more of Lord Bobby than herself when she presently asked :

‘Don’t you think they will ever be discovered, Bob?’

‘No ; I am afraid we shall never see anything of them again, dear,’ he reluctantly acknowledged.

‘Three months’ searching without success doesn’t give a very cheerful hope, and I doubt whether we shall ever gain a trace of them now.’

‘I am sorry, Bobby, for your sake,’ she confessed gently.

‘And I for yours, Nibbie,’ he responded. ‘But we may as well resolve to hope.’

‘Yes, of course we will, Bob. But there is one thing I hope,’ she rejoined quietly.

‘What’s that, Nibbie?’ he inquired curiously.

‘That we shall have no slip between the cup and the lip—that we shall have no trouble come between us,’ she explained a little vaguely.

‘Why, of course we shan’t,’ he dismissed, with that cheerful audacity of assurance to which presumptuous humanity is prone. ‘What makes you have that fancy, Nib?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘And yet I do,’ she added with her next breath. ‘To tell you

the truth, Bob, I had an adventure at Mrs. Wolff Goldberg's last night. I am sorry I went, but the pater wanted the mater to go; so I went. Do you know the person who owns the name of Charlotte Kaufmann ?

'No, Nibbie; I haven't that pleasure. What about her?' replied Bobby, with dutiful interest.

'I don't know that there is any pleasure in it,' continued Miss Nibbie. 'I can't say that I like the Goldbergs; there is something about them—I don't know what—that doesn't seem to suit my element.'

'They are new, Nib, and a little bizarre,' commented Lord Bobby dryly.

'Yes, I dare say that's it, Bobby,' agreed Miss Nibs. 'At any rate, I certainly don't like Mrs. Kaufmann. She and Mrs. Goldberg are sisters, and she is just back from somewhere—South Africa, I believe.'

'Johannesburg, most likely,' commented Lord Bobby again. 'That is where Goldberg comes from.'

'Well, Johannesburg, or wherever it may be,' continued Miss Nibs with emphasis, 'I certainly don't like her. When we were introduced she stared at me in a most curious and unpleasant way, though she did it in such a covert manner that I am quite sure she did not mean the mater

or Mrs. Goldberg to see it. How she knew it, Bobby, I don't know; for we are only just sprouting, aren't we?" she went on, with a playful little laugh. 'But, later in the evening, she took an opportunity to speak to me, and she asked me: "You are engaged to Lord Robert Leslie, are you not?" I thought her very ill-bred and impertinent.'

'Perhaps she saw us in the Park yesterday morning,' suggested Lord Bobby by the way. 'Mrs. Goldberg may have pointed us out to her and told her our names. If so, she probably guessed the rest,' he laughed. 'It's a woman's natural faculty to be able to scent an engagement in the air, isn't it?'

'Possibly it is,' she laughed slyly, taking her part in his humour. 'But I must tell you the rest. Of course, I said "Yes." And then what do you think she said, Bobby?'

Bobby shook his head impotently, as if it were impossible that mere man could fathom what might have been said in such feminine circumstances. 'Goodness only knows,' he said with sincerity.

'Well, Bobby,' revealed Miss Nibs seriously, 'she said: "Then I hope you MAY marry him!" but she said it in a way which wasn't pleasant. I am not a simpleton, Bobby; but I

didn't like it a little bit. And I don't like it now.'

Bobby did not immediately answer. He turned and took her face between his hands ; then he quietly looked into her eyes for some moments, and finally he kissed her lips.

'Bosh!' he then remarked. 'Not the kiss, Nibbie, but the Kaufmann. She is probably some person of no breeding. Don't let her bother you. When in doubt about marrying, Nibbie, you ask me.'

Nevertheless, some time later, when his *tête-à-tête* with Miss Nibbie was at an end, Lord Bobby wondered what the dickens the Kaufmann person meant.

CHAPTER XVIII

MYSTERY WITHIN MYSTERY

A NIGHT of leaden slumber, into which obtruded grisly visions of dead men, did not refresh Richard Markham for the affairs of the day which followed his grim adventures at the East India Docks. His throat was dry, and his appetite was so microscopic as to be practically non-existent. Miss Nibs he amazed by requiring a third cup of tea.

If his physical state was slack, his mental condition was very little better. His brains made known to him the fact that they were inert and dull ; and he proposed to himself, by way of satisfying his cynical humour of self-disparagement, that his wits were exchanged for a sack of sawdust and a crop of cobwebs.

As soon as opportunity served, he applied his attention to his morning papers. His power of concentration was as unsteady and beclouded as his wits were heavy and clogged. He could not be certain that he had not passed the item of news

for which he was looking. He retraced the columns of the pages one by one, but he ended, as before, in finding nothing.

The murder of the captain of the *East Anglia* had not yet been announced to the world.

Markham braced himself with an effort, and forced himself to think ; and, by dint of thinking, he at last reached two conclusions.

Either the body of the captain had not been found before an hour which was too late for the morning papers to report the tragedy ; or the police, in the hope of capturing the murderer before imaginative penny-a-liners could conjecture their probable movements for his benefit and enlightenment, had taken care to prevent any information of the crime being communicated to the press.

These surmises gave Markham some satisfaction, and he waited in secret impatience for the early-morning appearance of the evening papers.

The better to insure the confinement of his interest entirely to himself, he presently left the house, and went towards Piccadilly Circus. As he reached Devonshire House, a tatterdemalion approached on preposterously desperate feet, hurling before him a voice tempestuous with the shockingness of tragedy in general, and of the present cause of uproar in particular. He paused

before Markham, delivered a 'Noos,' took a penny without giving change, and then flung himself forward with a fresh yell of commotion, his legs a species of wild automata, his body a meek, harried victim in the midst of what it seemed to helplessly regard as a wholly incomprehensible tumult.

Markham crossed the road, and entered the Green Park. When he reached a convenient spot, he opened the paper, and in fateful type he beheld the foulness of murder made visible. He read :

‘DOCK TRAGEDY.

‘CAPTAIN MURDERED ON BOARD HIS SHIP.

‘£5,000 IN DIAMONDS MISSING.

‘DARK COINCIDENTS DEEPEN THE MYSTERY OF
THE CRIME.

‘DETECTIVES FOUND DYING ON THE UNDERGROUND.

‘This morning another capital crime has to be added to the growing list of London tragedies.

‘On Thursday the *East Anglia*, the famous vessel of Messrs. Hone, Sons and Company, owners of the Leadenhall Line, disembarked her passengers and mails at Southampton, and afterwards steamed up-Channel to discharge her cargo at the East India Dock. She reached the dock-

head all well just before dark last night, and, after being hauled to her berth, she was left in every way ship-shape for the night.

‘At two o’clock this morning Captain Floodyer, R.N.R., her popular commander, was found lying upon the floor of his cabin with a wound in his left breast, and with his throat cut from ear to ear.

‘Robbery, there can be little doubt, was the motive of the crime. The Captain’s private locker had been forced open, and the disordered state of his cabin showed that the murderer had worked in feverish haste in his search for the plunder which had tempted him to his foul and hazardous enterprise; for Captain Floodyer was a powerful man, and was not less fearless than he was powerful. It is conjectured, in fact, that he was wakened by the movements of the intruder, and that he was in the act of leaping from his bunk to grapple with him when he received his death-blow. Dr. Tupper, who was summoned immediately the body was found, has suggested a very reasonable hypothesis of what probably occurred. He believes that the murderer, seeing the Captain waking, rushed at him as he was scrambling from his bunk, and plunged a knife into his breast, afterwards using the weapon upon his throat to prevent his raising an alarm with his dying breath.

'Some wonder will probably be excited as to what a thief could have hoped to find of value in the ordinarily professional contents of the cabin of a ship's captain. In that respect it is melancholy to reflect that, in losing his life at the hands of a ruthless murderer, Captain Floodyer has fallen a martyr to his sense of duty. In ordinary circumstances Captain Floodyer, having docked his ship and reported his arrival to his owners, would have proceeded to his home at Croydon ; but, having been entrusted at the Cape with the personal delivery of a costly packet of diamonds consigned to Sir George Rowley, M.P., there can be little doubt that he resolved to remain on board the *East Anglia* in charge of his trust until the hour when he would have been released from his responsibility this morning.

'Sir George Rowley, who was seen by one of our representatives early this morning, is genuinely grieved by the pathetic tragedy to which his fatal diamonds have given rise. He has no doubt that the gems were the plunder for which the murderer invaded the ship, though he is at a loss to conjecture how the fact of their being in the custody of Captain Floodyer became known to the ruffian who caused his death. Sir George recalled having mentioned the coming of the diamonds to England by the *East Anglia* to a small party of friends at

his club some ten or eleven days ago ; but it is impossible for him to say who was present in the smoking-room on that occasion, inasmuch as the club happened to be exceptionally full, many members being present with friends whom they had introduced. Many of the visitors were, of course, total strangers to Sir George, and he had naturally no occasion to take special notice of any of them. It is therefore highly improbable that he would recognise any of them, even if he again saw them at the club. The evening was an animated one, and the club servants were constantly in and out of the room ; so that while it may be possible that some person of dark character overheard Sir George's announcement, it is impossible to surmise who that person may have been.

‘Here is a mystery in itself, but it gathers volume as we proceed. Sir George states that having regard to the many jewel robberies which have recently occurred, he informed the police authorities at Scotland Yard of the approach of the diamonds, and requested that an officer might be detailed for duty at the East India Docks when the *East Anglia* arrived at her berth. Scotland Yard was not slow to comply with the request, probably because it was inspired by a hope that in so doing it might gain some clue to the system of

robbery which has so long baffled its powers of penetration. Two officers were detached for the purpose of watching the arrival of the vessel, and they appear to have boarded her as soon as she was made fast to her moorings. They spent some time on board, and then left not only the ship, but also the docks, taking their way to Blackwall Station, and travelling thence to the Fenchurch Street terminus of the line. The circumstances of their so doing, like all the rest, is shrouded in mystery.

‘To-day’s morning papers published reports of the finding of two police officers in a dying state between the Mansion House and Blackfriars Bridge Stations of the District Railway. It is doubtful whether any person who read those reports would think of associating the finding of the two dying officers with the tragedy at the East India Docks ; yet, extraordinary as the fact may seem, the link is actual and complete.

‘The two officers were the Scotland Yard detectives who were entrusted with the duty of watching the arrival of the *East Anglia*.

‘How they came to be discoverable in a dying state so far removed from the extreme East End as Blackfriars Bridge may now never be definitely known. Several theories have been suggested,

and any one of them may be right ; on the other hand, all of them may be wrong.

‘It should be stated that Sir George Rowley originally intended to proceed to the docks this morning, in order to personally receive the diamonds from Captain Floodyer, and to give him a discharge for them. At the last moment, however, hoping to insure the immediate safety of the gems, he wrote an authorization for the diamonds to be delivered to the police representatives. Whether they were delivered to the detectives there is now no means of ascertaining, inasmuch as both men are dead, and the statements of the *East Anglia’s* crew satisfactorily establish the fact that Captain Floodyer received the officers in his own cabin, no other person being present.

‘The first theory, therefore, is that the officers received the diamonds ; that they were shadowed by the gang which had had designs upon the gems ; that they were assailed in the railway tunnel between the Mansion House and Blackfriars Bridge Stations ; and that, after being overpowered and robbed, they were thrown from the carriage under the wheels of a passing train.

‘Against this theory is set up the doubt whether Captain Floodyer parted with the diamonds at all. The commander of the *East Anglia* was known to

be a most careful man—careful almost to suspiciousness whenever occasion arose to cause him doubt. He is acknowledged, moreover, to have been a stickler to the letter of his instructions. It is conceivable, therefore, that if he received directions at Cape Town to deliver the diamonds to Sir George Rowley and to none other, he would strictly adhere to the letter of his instructions, even though all Scotland Yard presented itself at his gangway head and volunteered to satisfy his doubts by producing its credentials. As one of his own officers has tersely put it, in such circumstances he would be likely to say: "Yes, papers look honest enough, but I don't know you. No offence; they may be bogey—manufactured, you know; or you mayn't have come by 'em honestly; letter may be a bogey, too, for aught I know. Come with Sir George in the morning, and if I've rubbed you the wrong way, you shall take it out of my whisky. Can't say fairer than that." It is suggested, therefore, that the officers may have failed to obtain the diamonds, and that, having made the best possible arrangements to insure their safety for the night, they were returning to Scotland Yard to report progress. One thing alone is certain—namely, that Sir George Rowley's letter of authorization was still in the pocket of the senior officer when he and

his companion were found on the District line. Obviously, whatever Captain Floodyer may have said to the two officers in the way of facts, or otherwise, can now never be known. The actual situation may have been vastly different to any which may now be surmised; but, however that may be, it is certain that no diamonds were found upon the men, nor were any to be found on board the ship.

‘These suggestions naturally require the construction of a further theory to account for the manner in which the two officers came to meet their deaths on the District line. On this point it is ingeniously argued that the occurrence may have been purely accidental. It has now been definitely ascertained that about an hour before the officers were found a carriage-door of one of the down Circle trains was observed by a porter at Blackfriars Station to be swinging open over the six-foot way. He jumped from the up-platform, upon which he was standing, and, climbing to the footboard of the carriage, closed the door. He did not report the circumstance, however, his supposition being that some absent-minded passenger, looking up suddenly from his paper and finding himself at his destination, had hastily opened the door to alight, probably just as the train was again moving, and, perceiving his

mistake, had scrambled to the platform-door of the carriage. Nor is this the only fact of significance. It is now known that several trains were brought to a standstill in the tunnel between the Mansion House and Blackfriars Bridge Stations at about the time when the two officers either fell or were thrown upon the line. Taking these facts into consideration, it is suggested that the officers were probably occupants of a carriage with an off-side door apparently shut, but not actually fastened ; that one of the officers, on leaning out of the window to ascertain the cause of delay, fell through the yielding door under a passing up-train ; that his companion, in an endeavour to rescue him, became involved in disaster between the two trains ; and that the carriage which showed an open door at Blackfriars Station was probably the one in which the men had travelled.

‘All this is purely deductive reasoning, but it cannot be denied that it may contain the possible solution of the mystery. As an explanation, it is strengthened by the fact that when the two unfortunate officers were found, their relative positions on the line went far to suggest some such catastrophe as that which has been indicated. The elder of the two men had both legs severed above the knees. He was lying across the six-foot way, as if he had been dragged into that

position by someone who had had no time to accomplish more, and he was already unconscious from loss of blood. His companion lay a yard or two nearer the Mansion House Station, in such a position as to suggest that, while stooping to render aid, he had been blinded by steam from the exhaust-pipe of the passing engine, and had fallen with his left foot under the train. He was still conscious, but was sinking, when found, and the signs and motions which he made with his hands seemed to be intended to indicate that there had been some kind of fall. He was too weak to speak. Both men, it was evident, must have lain in the six-foot way some time before they were found ; in fact, it was only the stopping of a train in the tunnel, and the hearing of their moans by the passengers, which finally led to their discovery. They died before reaching St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

'As to the murder to which these fatalities are incidental, the police acknowledge that, as yet, they have no tangible clue to the author of the crime. They are satisfied that no suspicion is attachable to any person who remained on board the *East Anglia* during the night, each member of the ship's company having fully accounted for his movements from the time of the vessel's arrival in dock to the hour when the captain's body was

found. The only thing of possible service at present in the hands of the police is a pair of lace-up boots, which were found against a fence in the neighbourhood of the ship. This fence forms the riverward boundary between the dock and the adjoining iron-yard, and there can be little doubt that the murderer effected his entry of the dock from this direction. As a watch was set on board the *East Anglia*, it may seem remarkable that a thief should have been able to board the vessel, slay its captain, and depart unobserved; but Benjamin Tarbutt, the boat's watch, has admitted that he fell asleep about ten o'clock, and did not wake until a considerable time had elapsed. Dr. Tupper's examination of the body has enabled him to definitely state that Captain Floodyer was killed between half-past ten and eleven o'clock. So far as can be ascertained, only one stranger, in addition to the detectives, was present in the dock when the *East Anglia* was being hauled to her berth. He is vaguely described as having been of gentlemanly appearance, but here his portraiture ends, as nobody seems to have bestowed upon him more particular notice. The significance which attaches to this stranger is that nobody saw him leave the dock. Although he entered by the gate at Black-wall Station, he did not leave by it, nor did he pass out by way of the main entrance at the East

India Dock Road. The police will endeavour to trace this man, but, in the circumstances, their hope of success appears to be exceedingly small.'

In this plain narrative, unembellished by any literary graces, Markham read all that was essential to his clear understanding. The boots which had been found against the boundary fence of the dock were the boots of Samuel Nickens, but Samuel Nickens himself had not yet risen to stare with dead eyes from the creek in which he lay shrouded, palled by an element which symbolized his own eternal silence. The flat bottom of a barge, perhaps, held his body in the close embrace of the river's slimy ooze. But, even so, the creek could not long keep its ghastly secret from the light of day.

Samuel Nickens as carrion was possibly preferable to Samuel Nickens as a sentient being ; nevertheless, Markham regretted that he had been removed from the sphere of the living. For humanity, it was perhaps a timely hap ; for himself it was, without a doubt, a hap most untimely. With the death of Samuel Nickens disappeared the one key which he had possessed for a possible unlocking of the door to further knowledge. Events, in short, had raised a barrier against all his further progress.

The knowledge that the police were in search of him gave him no uneasiness, but he perceived the impediment which they would be in his path immediately the body of Samuel Nickens was found and recognised. All hope of possible further discovery in St. Peter's Street would then be barred from him.

Markham folded the paper and dropped it into the convenient corner of a pathside seat. He saw the work before him.

His task was to find the man with the hair of the hue of muddy flax.

CHAPTER XIX

A WOMAN'S LIFE THAT FAILED

IF variety is the sauce of life, the Honourable Basil Markham had apparently been placed in circumstances which had for some time kept him beyond the reach of it when he entertained that doughty hunter, Captain Edwin Augustus Gunning, at Cadogan Terrace on the Saturday evening which followed the murder of that other excellent captain, whose patronymic was Floodyer, and whose nautical skill had safely brought the Nimrod from the shooting of lions abroad to the suffering of lionization at home.

The Captain was not unnaturally full of the slaying of 'poor old Floodyer,' and he swore privately to the Honourable Basil that he would like, with a delirium of unholy pleasure, 'to have his paws on the blackguard who did it.'

The declaration did credit to the Captain's manly desire to enlist himself in the service of Nemesis, but, as the Honourable Basil did not know

Captain Floodyer, and had no personal intimacy with his departed worthiness, the dock tragedy was to him of no more than gutter interest. He disliked the inferior and the animal side of life. Butcher's meat might be necessary to his sustenance, but he had an elegant contempt for the trade of the butcher's shop. Its place was among the lower and grosser things of existence, and murders, suicides, and dog-like deaths formed in his sensibility that coarse side of human life which is symbolized by the butcher's shop. In these squeasy sentiments he lacked consistency, but humanity does not exist to be consistent.

The genial promise of Southampton was, therefore, only partially fulfilled. But the failure of the evening to achieve perfect success was in no wise due to the Honourable Basil's lack of cordiality. The thing amiss was not his cordiality, but his spirits; and, with suitable self-spurning, he confessed himself to be 'a little out of sorts.' A certain constraint seemed to beset him, and occasionally his manner was almost distrait. At intervals his face gave flitting, scarcely perceptible, signs of his being ill at ease, as if he might have strangely dispossessed his guest of a prized article of value, and now lacked sufficient moral courage to acknowledge his default in friendship, fearing

that his tale of possession would perhaps not be believed.

This hardly controllable state of mood was altogether antipodean to the Honourable Basil's normal condition of mind and will. Usually his face was the obedient pupil of his own schooling, expressing neither more nor less than that which his mental authority commanded ; so that, if his powers on this occasion were disordered, some more than common incident must have occurred to disturb them.

In the innermost secrecy of his own councils, the Honourable Basil confessed that he had been 'not quite himself' since his encounter with the woman to whom the gallant Captain had given precedence at the gangway head of the *East Anglia* at Southampton. There were moments, in fact, when he went to the verge of anathematizing Southampton, and of cursing the redoubtable Captain for having happened to land there on the day of his own presence at the port.

Such being his condition of mind and body, the Honourable Basil was not sorry when the hour came for the Captain to leave Cadogan Terrace for the purpose of returning to his own den in the Albany. His reflections, when he was once more left alone with them, he allowed to drift into the cradled hours of Sunday morning.

The church parade of the advanced day saw him not, neither did anything which moved in the world without. He girded up his loins for the business fray of the coming week by remaining hermetically within doors from earliest morn until latest night.

The recuperative force of his chosen process seemed to be well proven, for on Monday morning he was dressed betimes, and by eleven o'clock he was discoverable within the labyrinths of Gresham House, whose front is Broad Street, and whose back is Bishopsgate Street, 200 yards rearward. Such are the warren-like places of the Empire City of the world, wherein the human mole, native and instinctive of the Metropolis, an Adam of trade, commerce, and finance, who has no like nor counterpart on all the face of the earth, may pass from office-block to office-block, from passage to passage, from architectural maze to architectural maze, unknown of the stranger in the outer streets, and seeing no light of day until he emerges from his burrowing a quarter of a mile distant from the masonic hole in which he first disappeared. An amazing city ! A city at which the stranger within the gates marvels, who leaves it, when his passing sojourn is done, ignorant that he has left behind him things unknown at which he would have still more greatly marvelled. Some

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of these busy, swarming networks in builded stone are cynically known to the experienced habitués of the City as 'sinks of iniquity'—sinks of financial iniquity, to wit. But this is mere comment by the way.

The Honourable Basil knew the pattern of his Gogmagog City as well as any of its daily myriads, and at Gresham House he went direct to the board-room which formed part of the office suite of the Nineveh Treasures, Limited. There he took the seat allotted to his use at the table of the company's directorate, and contributed his quota of business acumen to the process of guiding the destinies of the company's undertaking; for he was scrupulous in earning his director's fees, even when there was little hope that the enterprise would ever earn a dividend.

His business at Gresham House despatched, the Honourable Basil betook himself to Cornhill. In this proceeding there was nothing exceptional or peculiar. The Honourable Basil, like many another manifold man of money within the radius of the Bank, was a pluralist, having several financial irons in as many financial fires. At present he was a minor pluralist, with ambitions towards greater plurality, greater plurality meaning loftier power and additional pelf, and additional pelf meaning greater increase to essential elegance.

He was continuing an essay which he had begun comparatively late in life. But he aimed always at the maximum, and he meant to succeed.

It was for this reason that he betook himself to Cornhill in quest of Mr. Wolff Goldberg. In his person Mr. Wolff Goldberg typified the exploitation of South Africa. His was the hand that manipulated and controlled the subtle and complicated amalgam of South African schemes—an organism whereof the blood was public millions, and the vital breath was an abounding faith in Mr. Goldberg's integrity and brains. He was the Colossus who held sources of information and knowledge which no other man could command, and the Honourable Basil appreciated the value of his intimate acquaintance. Speculative schemes were now developing in South Africa in which the Honourable Basil had a constructive interest, conjoined with a valuable advantage in being associated with Mr. Wolff Goldberg; and the object of his present visit to Cornhill was to take counsel with Mr. Goldberg with regard to certain South African information which had come privately to his own hand.

But the Honourable Basil was doomed to disappointment. The eminent Goldberg, he learned, had left his mandatory court of massive mahogany and plate-glass to preside at a statutory meeting

at Winchester House ; and to Broad Street he accordingly returned in a state of prickling vexation. A statutory meeting is a roseate prologue in which the chairman speaks before the curtain, and announces with crisp brevity that the speculative play is about to begin ; and, when the Honourable Basil looked into the Great Hall at Winchester House, he perceived, from the condition of its emptiness, that the potent Goldberg had already been and gone.

For two or three hours he was condemned to the tantalization of pursuing the Colossus from place to place, being always just behind his tail, but never near enough to catch it. Whether at the Cannon Street Hotel, or in the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange, he was invariably a moment too late, with the final upshot that, when he made his last call at Cornhill at three o'clock, he learned that the busy Colossus had left the City for the day.

His mood, having been rasped for three hours by exasperating annoyances, was wholly raw, and in no sense amiable. He took a belated lunch, which he did not enjoy, and then disposed of the remnants of his equally belated business. Finally, he hailed a hansom, and gave the cabman directions to drive him westward. His pursuit of the masterful Goldberg was not yet at an end.

Urgency was impressed upon the matter in hand, and he followed the Colossus homeward in the devout and sanguine hope that he was pursuing him in his last tracks.

At a quarter to six he rang the visitors' bell of the Goldberg mansion in Hyde Park Gardens, and a moment later the hall-door was opened to him.

'Mr. Goldberg, sir, is out,' announced the man who answered his summons; 'he left word that he would not be home before six.'

'Very well, Wilson, I will wait,' decided the Honourable Basil promptly. 'It is nearly six now, and I want to see him very particularly.'

'Perhaps you would like to wait in the library, sir; there are books there,' suggested Wilson, as he closed the door. 'Mrs. Goldberg is at home, but she is not well to-day, and is keeping her room.'

The Honourable Basil having accepted the suggestion, the excellent Wilson, with the air of an immaculate gentleman's gentleman, led the way to the library, where he placed an easy-chair before the fire, and left the Honourable Basil to beguile the period of waiting in whatsoever manner might be most congenial to his tastes. At the moment the Honourable Basil's mental cravings were not exacting; and, after a cursory

glance at the books upon the shelves, he chose for his entertainment a volume whereof the title was 'The Device of Angelina Dixon.' What kind of original woman had inspired the author to immortalize her in the character of 'Angelina Dixon' he did not know, nor did he feel himself very greatly disposed to care ; but as the solemn testimony of certain infallible reviewers that 'Angelina Dixon' was a brilliant example of the New Humour was still fresh in his mind, and as he felt that the irritations of the day were entitled to be allayed, either by the narcotic of New Humour or by such other means as might be equally effective, he bestowed himself in the chair which Mr. Wilson had placed for his accommodation, and prepared to skim such opiate cream as the surface of the milk of New Humour might yield in the present Dixonian crock.

But he was fated to make no effectual beginning of his skimming. He had been reading barely three minutes when the door of the room opened, and he faced about in his chair, expecting to confront the splendid Goldberg.

Instead he beheld the woman of Southampton—the woman of the *East Anglia's* gangway head.

The pallid strain that came into his face disfigured it horribly. His eyes were set in a tense, uncomfortable stare. His body was stiffened, as

if the blood in his veins had been swiftly turned into stone.

The glance of the woman fell upon him with a start ; but, with a quick recovery of her self-possession, she turned and closed the door. Then she looked at him for a moment without speaking.

That she was beautiful her whole vision made manifest, but her beauty was of the darkness of the night. Her coldly pale face suggested a once Oriental loveliness, now chilled by Arctic snows. Her eyes were lustrous, but the light in them was as the glint of ice. Her full, round bosom heaved with intense emotion ; and downward her black-robed figure expressed the living presence of the supple and the sinuous.

A very Medusa of a woman !

‘Mr. Basil Markham,’ she said in a dry, tense voice, after her momentary survey, ‘let me introduce myself—Charlotte Kaufmann, once Charlotte Cohen, the toy of Gerald Marston, afterwards Basil Markham.’

The Honourable Basil winced. He tried to speak, but the words dried, broke, and powdered in his throat.

‘You did not expect to see me here, did you ?’ she went on, as before. ‘Well, the surprise is not less to me. I did not expect to see you again—and to speak to—quite so soon. I thought it

possible that we might meet, but I anticipated that it would be at some social affair; I never thought it would be here, and alone, like this. Your wife and daughter were here the other night, but you would naturally not know Charlotte Cohen again in Charlotte Kaufmann.'

She spoke as if with each word she were drawing around him a mesh of icy steel. Yet Basil Markham was still unable to speak.

'So we meet again—Jewess and Christian,' she continued, in tones so even and cold as to seem fearful in their frigidity. 'Or, perhaps, I should rather say—fool and coward. By our rabbinical law a Cohen may not approach the dead; but I, a Cohen, trusted the living too well. Has the thought ever seared your heart, Basil Markham, that I, Charlotte Cohen, loved you—loved you with all my heart and soul?' Her lips became the seat of intense irony. 'No; I'll be bound it hasn't. Heart! You have no heart! Nor have I now.'

Basil Markham at last found voice to speak, but his breath was thick, and the words dropped low upon his lips.

'I have suffered,' he said, as if on that account he might claim some clemency, and might seek to mollify his accuser.

'Suffered!' she repeated keenly. 'What has

been your suffering in comparison with mine? Your kiss burnt into my soul, and made me an outcast among my people. I loved a Christian. But people, religion, home—everything I would have sacrificed for you. But what was my reward ?

An inarticulate sound came from Basil Markham's lips, and a broken gesture of appeal struggled from his whipped confusion.

'The fate of a rose withered by an icy blast in June,' she went on in cold remorselessness. 'That was my reward. And yours was the breath that made havoc of my life.'

'But you married,' he ventured to plead, endeavouring by the tone of his husky voice to suggest that he did not extenuate the wrong which he had committed.

'Married!' she rejoined bitterly. 'Married! Yes, I married. How else was I to restore myself to my place among my people? Charlotte Cohen was ever knowable for her love of a base Christian; but Charlotte Kaufmann was Charlotte Cohen washed and made clean. But did my heart go with me to the synagogue with Jacob Kaufmann, do you think? Did my eyes shed tears of blood when I buried him at Johannesburg? No, I had no heart; it was dead and buried—buried in the grave dug for it by a heartless Gentile. That, Basil Markham, is the woman you have

made of me—a husk of a woman, without a heart.'

'If I had known, perhaps——'

Markham faltered hoarsely, and the words seemed to coagulate upon his dry, ineffectual lips.

'If you had known!' she echoed, with chill intensity. 'Say if you had cared. Did it matter to you that I had to go to South Africa to get back to my place among my people? No, not so much as the flicker of an eyelid. But even that kindness might have been denied to me if my sister had not married Goldberg and gone with him there. It was she who invited me out. And it was her being there that made it possible for me to go. And there I married Kaufmann; there, until his death, I have been ever since; and there I first learnt that the coward, Gerald Marston, was the Honourable — ay, the Honourable — Basil Markham. Illustrated papers have a way of drifting into out-of-the-way places, Basil Markham, even when they are many weeks old. What this daughter of Judah saw seven thousand miles away was a portrait of Gerald Marston, whose name had become Basil Markham; and by the side of it was the picture of a woman, which the paper said was Basil Markham's bride. Oh, God of Abraham! that was the death-blow to all that

was left in me capable of love. I, who would have given my life's blood for you, drop by drop—Basil Markham, did you ever know again such love?’

For some moments the strangely-met pair stood looking at each other without speaking. What were their passing thoughts only each in secret knew; but through the emotions of Basil Markham a hot flood of reaction was now surging, as if the true passions of his nature, long confined within the artificial dams of circumstances, were at last bursting bond, and were pouring through their breached barriers in torrential tumult. After all, he loved, yet feared, this woman—loved her with all the savageness of resurgent and reminiscent, but now ungratifiable, desire, yet feared her with a dread to which his unnerved courage dare not give either a distinctive image or a descriptive name. In his soul was the poignant, unavailing sweetness of memory. She again stood before him a living but unapproachable presence—the woman who in olden time sparkled exaltation of her womanhood to him alone of all men. The magnetism of her body thrilled him in every nerve; and, as malicious spite conjured before his mental vision an image of the mediocre wearer of his name at Cadogan Terrace, he could have crushed her in his arms with all the ardour of his old-time

passion. But she stood as one apart from him for ever.

She stood looking at him now with a strange, cold light in her eyes. Suddenly the gleam intensified, and she took a step forward, craning her neck swan-like towards him.

'Basil Markham,' she said in a low, keen voice, 'you have a daughter. Would you like her to marry, or would you like her to suffer as I have suffered?'

Markham's face twitched painfully, and his whole body seemed to wince. He moved his hands, as if he would employ them to support the difficult appeal of his tongue.

'What would you do?' he asked hoarsely.

For the first time Charlotte Kaufmann laughed. There was no scorn in her laughter, for scorn is hot, and the laugh before which Markham shrank was cold. It was the laugh of a face of ice, the frozen lips of which had suddenly curled—a chilling, blood-curdling laugh.

'What would I do?' she said steadily. 'There are many things I would do; but which of them would be the best is for me to choose. It was through my father, Basil Markham, that I first knew you, and it is through you that I first know your daughter. My father brought you from an all-night club to eventually turn my heart into

stone. Do you think there is much room left in it for pity?’

‘Charlotte!’ he ventured, in a voice filled huskily with diffident appeal.

She turned upon him fiercely.

‘Charlotte!’ she exclaimed with intense bitterness. ‘Charlotte me no Charlotte. I am Woman now to you. There was a time when I would have been life of your life, but now’—she paused and looked at him intently—‘you have a wife and a daughter,’ she added with curious emphasis. ‘Of my own father’s business life, of his life outside the home, I knew little in those days when you wrecked my life; but I know now, and I do not wonder that my mother feared and wept. What I am she made me, and not my father—thank God!’

Once more Markham winced. The whipped expression of his face became fearful, and his uneasy eyes, impelled by the rout of his self-control, furtively flitted at her face a glance of apprehension.

‘I am sorry I——’ he articulated difficultly.

‘Sorry!’ She checked him swiftly, quivering in every limb. ‘Sorry!’ she cried again, and then paused, as if impotent of further speech. ‘See!’ she went on suddenly, holding out the volume which she had brought with her into the room.

‘What is that book?—Congreve’s works, with “The Mourning Bride”—do you know it? Do you know the lines—

“ ‘Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned,
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned ’”?

God in heaven! I loved you once—love you now—hate you now!’

A broken moan burst from Markham’s lips, and, in obedience to some vague impulse, he staggered towards her with seeking arms. But she shrank from him in repulsion.

‘Go!’ she cried, with a cold fierceness that was pitiable. ‘For God’s sake go! The day is come for the daughter of Abraham—go!’

With a choking cry Markham broke from the room and stumbled down the stairs.

‘I can’t stay—any longer—Wilson,’ he announced to that worthy in a voice still difficult with agitation. ‘I must see—Mr. Goldberg—to-morrow.’

And, the hall-door being opened to him, he staggered down the steps, leaving the excellent Wilson in a very pronounced state of astonishment.

CHAPTER XX

BARRIERS—AND THE WAY OVER THEM

ALL is not irresistible that is ambitious. It pleased Richard Markham to believe that he had a natural and pretty talent for detection ; but, as he walked eastward along the Mall, after reading the account of the finding of the body of the captain of the *East Anglia*, he wryly admitted to himself that he was in 'a pretty pickle of bafflement.' He chose the Mall for his perambulations because he desired to be comparatively quiet ; and he desired to be comparatively quiet the better to assist his process of thinking. His original morning programme had contained the creditable item of attendance at the courts ; but now the courts, in his own guillotine phraseology, might 'go hang.' Nevertheless, his thinking refused to be assisted, and remained fast in its bog of incapability.

Nothing was easier than to determine that the man of the muddy-flax hair must be discovered, but the process by which that discovery was to be

effected was a satanic plague to devise. His original idea of revisiting St. Peter's Street, in the hope of gleaning such information as was there to be found, before the police took possession of the field, had seemed good, excellently good. But now that he came to study the proposal a little more critically, he did not clearly see by what kind of magic the door of the late Mr. Samuel Nickens's establishment at Mile End was to be induced to grant him admittance. He needed an Open Sesame, but his wits declined to aid him in searching for it.

In considering the possibilities of St. Peter's Street, his thoughts reverted naturally to the rascal whom he had seen so suitably discomfited by Mr. Nickens outside Nickens's garden gate. He did not know the name of that reprobate; but he had a pleasing conviction that if he desired to hold communication with him he could fully gratify the whim by going to the London Hospital. And here that astuteness which is the larger part of the talent for detection made itself manifest in Mr. Richard's mental processes. At the thought which suggested a visit to the London Hospital he not only promptly shook his head, but also emphatically murmured that 'it would not do.' The course was one which would require him to see too many people, and to ask too many questions.

And the danger lying behind the task of tracing the right man to the right ward was the account which the battered ruffian would certainly give of his maltreatment by Mr. Nickens as soon as he again came into full possession of his senses. The rogue's narrative, and the finding of the body of Samuel Nickens, would excite the curiosity of the hospital people ; and that curiosity, being communicated to the police, would raise the question, Who was the visitor to the patient with the broken skull, and what was the nature of his peculiar interest in him ?

Mr. Richard put the temptation behind him, and crossed the Horse Guards' Parade with a head still as destitute of ideas as the trooping-ground itself. He was in a maze of difficulty, with no visible way out ; and, having made certain professional calls, and afterwards fortified himself with necessary lunch, he returned to Cadogan Terrace in no very good mood either with things in general or with himself in particular.

His conviction that he had no reason to be very greatly pleased with the ordering of the cosmic system, if not chaste, was commendably definite, and supremely emphatic ; and his irritable disappointment at the empty result of his elaborate campaign at the East India Docks was as pungent

as it was voluminous. Constitutionally he was not of self-seeking habit, neither was he artfully designing in his impulses ; but he astutely perceived that in failing in his mission he had missed the achievement of a master stroke, of which the effect would have been to perfectly consolidate his own interests.

Miss Cissie Rowley was already attached to him by the several ties of plighted love ; but to have secured the diamonds from the Cape would have been to win her pride and pleasure, and to add another hardly breakable bond to the links by which she held herself to be bound to him.

Furthermore, success would have represented so signal a service to Sir George that that worthy baronet could not have missed the claim which it would have established to his special favour. Altogether, Mr. Richard regarded the besetting vexations of existence as a species of depravities to be roundly anathematized ; but he recovered his equanimity rapidly upon finding Miss Cissie Rowley in the company of Miss Nibs and Lord Robert Leslie in the drawing-room at Cadogan Terrace.

Miss Cissie welcomed him with a prettily rueful countenance.

‘Oh, Dick!’ she exclaimed, as he entered the room. ‘They’re gone!’

From which announcement, although not exactly lucid, Mr. Richard had no difficulty in inferring that the party had been engaged in discussing the disappearance of the gems.

‘Yes, Cissie, I know,’ he replied, with genuine regret; and, as he spoke, the vision of the dead captain of the *East Anglia* again came to his mind’s eye. ‘If they only knew, if they only knew,’ he thought to himself.

‘It’s horrible, isn’t it?’ observed Miss Cissie again, not a little hypnotized by the red hand of Death. ‘Even if we find them, Dick, I shall never like those diamonds—stained with blood.’

‘But you have nothing but innocence on your side, dear,’ encouraged Miss Nibs, who, not having lost a packet of diamonds, could ascend to more cheerful heights, and breathe a more rarefied atmosphere.

‘And besides,’ consoled Lord Bob, ‘there are several of us in the same boat. For aught I know to the contrary, mine—well, it is not an elegant, not a pleasant, way of putting it—but mine may have literally stewed in gore. But, if Nibbie is willing, I shall not refuse to let her wear them on that account—that is, if ever we get them back.’

The growing expression in Mr. Richard’s face indicated that he did not quite grasp the bearings

of these observations; but before he could announce his lack of comprehension Miss Nibs volunteered gratuitous assistance.

‘Dick, you don’t know,’ she said in a quiet tone of revelation; ‘but it is a case of “*Le roi est mort; vive le roi!*” The Marquis is dead; killed in India tiger hunting. Bob was telling me just before Cissie came, and I have been telling Cissie.’

‘You don’t mean to say that’s a fact?’ suggested Mr. Richard, his belief made difficult by the suddenness of the information.

‘Unfortunately, it is true, Dick,’ confirmed Lord Bob seriously. ‘Poor old Geof is dead; and, sorrowfully enough, his duties devolve upon me. I had not seen the evening papers when the cable came just before lunch, when I ought to have been coming here; and, after that, I was busy sending the information to the press agencies, so that I knew nothing of this wretched business at the docks until Miss Rowley brought us the news.’

‘Bob,’ observed Markham with sincerity, ‘I am not going to say that I know you will wear the honours illustriously, because a good man needs no windy compliments. I am sorry poor old Geof is gone, and so are you; he is your loss, and I condole with you with all my heart.’

'Thanks, Dick,' acknowledged Lord Bob simply; 'I could not have wished for a kinder expression. The jewels are dross in comparison with a human life; but, as Providence has willed events to be as they are, you can guess why I am now doubly sorry that the jewels are gone. They were heirlooms, you know, and I shall be the first Leslie with a despoiled chatelaine.'

Miss Nibs blushed a little, and Mr. Richard smiled a diminutive smile of understanding and sympathy. He doubly wished that he could materialize his boast that he would discover the thief of the Leslie jewels, and reach the nuptial altar at the same time as Miss Nibs. But, seeing before him no immediate method of consummating that desirable piece of prowess, he turned to Miss Cissie and inquired when she had first heard of the tragedy at the docks.

'Late last night, Dick,' Miss Cissie stated. 'A man from Scotland Yard brought us the news after the detectives had been found on the line. Poor pater is terribly cut up about it. And it does seem horrible—three men dead for a few diamonds that we have never seen and that we should never have missed. Lord Robert may be right about innocence being on our side, but I shall never be happy with the thought of the blood-stains on them.'

Dick Markham thought of the murdered Joseph Custer, of the man with the broken head in the London Hospital, of the body of Samuel Nickens lying in the ooze and wash of the Thames, and of the man with the muddy-flax hair hiding from the pursuit of avenging justice. And he saw that to all seeming the price of the diamonds had been the price of blood. Yet he sought encouragement from the heart's desire for an opposite conviction, and he said :

‘They may not be stained with blood after all, Cissie.’

‘What do you mean, Dick?’ inquired Miss Cissie and Miss Nibs in unison.

‘I hardly know, Cis,’ he answered, in the manner of a man sifting his thoughts. ‘It may be no more than a freak of fancy, but I seem to have in my mind the vague image of a possibility that it may be so.’

‘Fancy is inspiration’s Joseph’s coat,’ commented Lord Bob readily. ‘Let’s hope you may be right, Dick.’

‘Yes; fancy goes a long way in colours, Bobby,’ mused Miss Nibs sagaciously. ‘I wish to goodness we could find a good, real magic thinking-cap. “Set a thief to catch a thief,” they say. It almost makes one wish one knew the dodges of thieves, so as to be able to find the way into their

dens and learn the secret of one's disappearing things.'

The nebulous ideas which had been moving in Mr. Richard's brain swiftly took meteoric formation, and sped through his mind, trailing a path of light. He now saw the way in which he should go. It should not be impossible to gain admittance to the lair of the late Samuel Nickens, by posing as one of the missing rascal's disreputable friends.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GULF BETWEEN

THE mystery of the heart of a woman wronged may never be fathomed.

Charlotte Kaufmann slept little of the night which followed her pitiful recrossing of the path of Basil Markham. The tempest of her nerves raged on, and, in the solitude of her bedchamber, she shed tears of bitterness, as hot with the burning havoc of her life as her words to Markham had been icy cold. She loved the man, and because of her ineradicable love for him she left her bed at rising with face pallid and with eyes dark-rimmed and worn. Yet her whole soul was in revolt against him, and in her heart was the virus which flowed from the thought of the punishment that he deserved.

When she had breakfasted, she dressed herself for outdoor walking; and leaving the house, she entered Hyde Park, and chose for her walk the path which crossed the grassy, tree-engirted

spaces to the spot at which the Serpentine had its eastern extremity. Thence she reached the streaming highway of Piccadilly, where she crossed the road, and presently entered Sloane Street.

All things wore, to her eye, a face that was strange, yet not strange. The atmosphere of long absence enveloped and toned them all; so that she felt like a stranger in a strange land, wherein, nevertheless, old familiars, again met, made themselves her constant companions. But these sensations of a woman returned from long exile to her mother city, although irrepressible, were not predominant to the exclusion of all other phases of intent and feeling.

Caroline Kaufmann was curious to see the house that sheltered the man who had crossed, as an evil genius, the path of her life, ravelling its courses and marring all her days.

She had made no attempt at disguise; and now, as she entered Cadogan Terrace, she sought no aids to concealment. Upon her side was the superiority of suffered wrong; upon his the inferiority of nervous dread. Her wrongs were the garrison of her strength.

As she approached the house, the hall-door was opened, and a man who was not Basil Markham descended the steps. He passed her unobservantly,

and went towards Sloane Street with an evident destination in view.

‘His son,’ she said to herself. ‘Must be,’ she confirmed a moment later; ‘he has the Markham face.’

Then her musings wandered into bodesome groves, wherein were dark lurking-places such as formless evils might inhabit.

‘It would be well to punish him through his son,’ she reflected, ‘especially if he prides in him. I wonder whether he loves him. He may; such heartless natures as his sometimes have a spot in them which is not all rock. I wonder which he is absorbed in most—son or daughter? Probably daughter. Nature has her own way of meting out retributive punishment, and possibly she will punish him through her. But Nature needs some assistance sometimes, and perhaps I may help her to punish him through them both. God! it is but just that I, in turn, should make him suffer. Is it not written, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”?’

Her original Orientalism, unextinguished even yet by the centuried wanderings of her race, warmed in her blood and tinged her thoughts. But her mien was sedate, and she walked as if her steps were subject to her meditation.

‘That house means money,’ she continued to

reflect. 'He is wealthier as Basil Markham than he was as Gerald Marston. He used to regret that his means were only a younger son's allowance, and that it was small at that, because his family were not wealthy. And while he spent it recklessly, he promised what he would do when we were married. What he would do! God of Abraham! that I should have loved and trusted him too well. He seems to have done much; but that door is there, with him behind it, and I am here. Heaven repay him for the villainy of a broken promise! Perhaps he married money,' she continued to muse. 'Rebecca could tell me, perhaps; but to inquire about him so closely would be to excite her curiosity. No; I must read his book myself. He is a director of companies now, or else Goldberg's prospectuses have discovered a second Basil Markham; but I should like to be able to follow his life from the time when Jacob Cohen died and the bitter punishment of heaven settled down upon my life.'

At this last thought the light in her eyes changed, the new gleam seeming to betoken a flash of inspiration. Then she turned, and retraced her steps; and as she again approached the house which was to her as the sepulchre of all that should have been in her life, Markham

himself left it, and preceded her, all unconscious of her near presence, into the broader stream of Sloane Street.

The irony of the moment entered her soul. The man who should have been her husband went one way, ununited and unmindful, while she went another, with all that should have made complete her womanhood hopelessly, and like a derelict, adrift.

At the corner of the terrace she entered an omnibus, and presently she overtook and passed Markham as he walked towards Piccadilly. She glanced at his face in passing, and she saw in it the expression of a soul not less torn than her own.

For a moment she pitied him with all the tenderness that yet remained beneath the crush and weight of her life's wreckage; but in the next instant she doubted whether any of the stress and strain which she beheld in his face was due to any pathetic regret in his heart for the loss of a happiness which had for ever passed beyond recall; and thereupon her bitterness renewed its strength, and her thought of punishment became as adamant.

But she was wrong. The expression in the face of Basil Markham was the unrefreshed expression of a man whose vain regrets throughout

the dragging weariness of the night had withheld the balm of slumber from his eyes. He had lain thinking and turning, turning and thinking ; and through all the tangle of his thoughts had run the knotted thread of his remembrance of her. And he was thinking of her now.

The pity of it !

The drift between them was hopeless, and both went their separate ways.

As for Charlotte Kaufmann, she did not leave her seat in the bus until the vehicle reached the Bank ; then she walked over London Bridge to the Borough, and sought a frowsy, ignominious little street in the neighbourhood of the Hop Exchange. Her dress was plain almost to severity, yet it contrasted acutely with the sordid dinginess of the narrow lane ; and inquisitive eyes stared at her in obvious speculation as to the nature of the errand which had brought her into the street and its squalor.

She paused presently before the dilapidated front of a small unclean tenement, and the doubtful expression that came into her face seemed to reflect a presentiment that she had undertaken a journey in vain. In another moment she had knocked at the grimy door, and had derived such benefit as was procurable from speech with the

blear-eyed slattern who misruled the abode within.

Charlotte Kaufmann had evidently failed, for she entered another bus, recrossed London Bridge, and presently made her way to London Wall. Her business apparently lay at the eastern end of the thoroughfare ; and her destination seemed to be a row of houses, which had once been shops and dwellings combined in one, but which were now shops and offices in every separate floor and part. In every case the door which had formerly given admittance to the dwelling portion of the house, as distinct from the separate door which had given, and still gave, freeway to the shop, stood open ; and Charlotte Kaufmann, passing through the open passage door of a house near the end of the row, ascended the stairs to the second floor, where the two doors on the landing displayed the name of 'W. F. Hentzner.'

For ten minutes Charlotte Kaufmann was presumably closeted with Mr. W. F. Hentzner ; and when she reappeared in the street some signs of satisfaction were in her face, as if she had partially accomplished the purpose for which she had set forth upon her morning travels.

Here her wanderings apparently ceased; for she hailed a hansom, and returned with all expedition to luncheon at Hyde Park Gardens.

Six o'clock of that day's evening saw Charlotte Kaufmann in St. Peter's Street, Mile End.

CHAPTER XXII

A STRANGE MEETING AND ITS INCIDENTS

FOR three days Mr. Richard Markham roundly and absurdly abused himself for being, in his own phrase, 'so idiotically conscientious.' He fumed desperately, and greatly mortified his spirit because a given quantity of work required a proportionate amount of time for its accomplishment, and because he was too strict in his adherence to his given promise either to leave the work undone or to scamp it in the course of performance. At other times he was accustomed to pride himself upon the unimpeachable fact that he had never stranded one of his editors by failing to acquit himself of his pledged undertakings ; but now that perverse circumstances seemed to have conspired against him for the malicious purpose of overloading him with work, he infused much venom into his abuse of circumstances, and preposterously desired that someone would 'write him down an ass' for his excessive scrupulousness

in the matter of fully discharging his literary engagements.

Nevertheless, while he incessantly provoked himself to impatient wrath, he steadily pursued his work throughout the Sunday and Monday which followed the public revelation of the tragedy at the docks ; and Tuesday afternoon saw the placing of the crowning-stone upon the edifice of his labours.

Then he rose from his writing-table with a long breath of satisfaction and relief. The thorn in his flesh had been his uneasy apprehension that while he was at work the body of Samuel Nickens might rise from its watery couch to confound all his plans ; but he accepted the absence of reports from the morning and evening papers as good assurance that the dead man had not yet been found in his river bed.

He shaped his determination upon the instant, changed his dress, and left the house. The hour was not yet six o'clock when he once again stood in St. Peter's Street, Mile End. But now that he was returned to that unfamiliar thoroughfare he was curiously affected by its native strangeness. He had prepared a plan upon which he had resolved to proceed ; but the comparatively weird environment of St. Peter's Street, its portentous gloominess, which miserly street-lamps ineffec-

tually struggled to dispel, seemed to advise pause and reflection. He walked up the street to reconsider his plan, and to reassure himself by the review that it was as feasible, and in that respect as excellent, as it had seemed to be at the moment of its conception.

Whether the plan was, or was not, perfect, he could find no more effective substitute for it; and, dismissing freakish doubt, he resolved to put it to the test. The first procedure involved knocking at the superior door of the Nickens' establishment. He turned midway in the street and retraced his steps.

For the unforeseen thing that happened he had made no preparation, and it precipitated his plan into instant confusion.

At the gate of the house he encountered a woman, who, like himself, was about to turn into it. She paused, and looked at him a half question; then his tongue obeyed his hasty wits, and he spoke.

'Pardon me,' he said, raising his hat. 'Have I the pleasure of speaking to Mrs. Nickens?'

'No,' she answered, her scrutiny of him becoming curious; 'I am not Mrs. Nickens. I am inquiring for the man of that name.'

'For the man of that name.' The form of the announcement impressed Markham as peculiar,

and his mind promptly became an antic in fancies. The woman was lightly veiled, and the glimmer of the rearward gas-lamp gave him no assistance in studying her features. He reflected a moment, then hazarded a bold experiment.

‘I do not mean it impertinently; but may I ask the reason why?’ he inquired in friendly overture.

She answered his question by asking him another.

‘You are not Mr. Nickens?’ she suggested pointedly.

‘No,’ he laughed, ‘I am pleased to say I am not.’

‘Why?’ she asked, not without significance.

‘Because one is better pleased to be one’s self, I suppose,’ he explained humorously.

‘Well,’ she observed, ‘I was looking for Nickens because he is acquainted with a man whose address I want to find. I have been away from England for some years. His name is Custer—perhaps you know him?’ she added, in a somewhat curious tone.

For a moment Markham hesitated; then he ventured upon another hazard.

‘No, I don’t know him,’ he replied truthfully; ‘but I can tell you what has become of him. He is dead.’

'Dead !' she repeated, in a tone suggesting disappointment rather than regret.

'Yes,' Markham reaffirmed. 'Perhaps you have only just returned to England, in which case you wouldn't know of it. He was murdered a few days ago.'

She did not immediately reply, but moved away from the gate towards the lamp. 'Perhaps we had better go a little away from here,' she suggested. 'Somebody may come out. Who killed him?' she inquired as she paused in the lamp-light.

'Nobody knows yet,' he explained. 'At present the whole thing is a mystery.'

'Is that why you are here?' she inquired, a little mysteriously. 'Nickens isn't suspected, is he?'

Markham was once again challenged for ready wit. He devoted a moment to studying the woman's face in the gaslight, and the knowledge that his strangely-met companion was in quest of the dead Custer prompted the mental suggestion that in this chance encounter he might possibly obtain a clue to the man whose hair was of the hue of muddy flax.

'You look honest,' he laughed. 'Shall I tell you?'

'That's for you to determine,' she returned casually.

‘Well,’ he continued, ‘I think I will tell you. The whole thing lies in a very small nutshell. As you are new to England, you wouldn’t know ; but there have been a great many big jewel robberies lately, and I am interested in them—not in the stealing of them, of course,’ he laughed again, ‘but in the endeavour to trace them.’

‘That’s a big task, isn’t it?’ she remarked thoughtfully.

‘Yes, I suppose it is,’ he agreed ; ‘but I am chiefly concerned in the disappearance of some valuable diamonds intended for a lady in whom I am interested. Although the murder of Custer is at present a mystery, there is no mystery as to what manner of man he was when alive. He was an expert jewel thief.’

‘I know that,’ commented the woman briefly. ‘Or, rather, I knew that he was a professional thief when I left London. Perhaps I will explain presently, but I will say now that I am interested myself, not in the thieving, but in something else.’

The hopes of Markham grew apace, and he continued confidently.

‘Well,’ he explained freely, ‘in interesting myself in Custer, I discovered that he had had associations with Nickens ; and Nickens, I have good reason for believing, is not everything that

he should be. At any rate, I have come upon things which point to his having disappeared ; and I have an idea that if I could gain admittance to his house, I should perhaps find a few clues which would help me in my search.'

'Where were the diamonds stolen?' asked his companion, with increasing interest.

'From the steamship *East Anglia*, now at the East India Docks,' Markham replied, watching her face closely.

'The steamship *East Anglia*,' she repeated in a curious tone.

'Yes,' he endorsed ; 'haven't you read the papers?'

'No ; I have not had time for much reading,' she answered somewhat mechanically ; 'but, if you like, I will help you in your search. . . . But may I ask your name?'

'Richard Markham,' he answered simply.

'I believe you,' she answered, with strange emphasis.

'Why—what do you mean?' he questioned, a little mystified.

'Because, if you had not said Richard Markham, I should have had my doubts,' she answered tersely. 'I know you.'

'You know me?' he exclaimed in amazement.

'Yes—never mind how—but I do,' she added

conclusively. 'Let me ask you instead—have you any idea where Custer lived?'

'Yes,' he returned, his tone still filled with puzzlement; 'he lived in Tredegar Square, which is at Bow, I believe.'

'Then we had better go there,' she suggested promptly. 'He is the man I wanted to find; and, from what I know of him, I have an idea that we shall find more there than we shall here.'

'But what about getting into the house?' he hesitated. 'Do you think it can be managed?'

'I think you can leave that to me,' she rejoined, turning to move away.

For a moment Markham paused in doubt; then he resolved to follow the adventure to its fate.

'By the way,' he observed, with genuine interest, 'I have not yet had the pleasure of learning your name.'

'You may call me Charlotte Kaufmann,' she said; and Markham thought that he detected a faint note of bitterness in her tone.

From that moment Charlotte Kaufmann pioneered the expedition of the evening with superior knowledge.

'I dare say you were doing the right thing, and were following the right course, but I think I am taking a quicker one,' she remarked, as they passed the Nickens' establishment and went towards

the Mile End Road. 'I am pretty certain that you would have had to work from Nickens to Custer, and I am going to Custer at once. In that I shall serve you and myself as well. Do you care to be guided by me? I will not deceive you; and, in proof of that, I may tell you that I have had no reason to love Custer. I had my own object in seeking him.'

'I said you looked honest,' Markham again laughed. 'I will trust you, and do whatever you suggest.'

'Then we had better take a car,' she suggested simply.

A period of fifteen minutes brought to Markham another change of scene. Tredegar Square was evidently a patrician area in the East, being impressive with a certain pretension to dignity and wealth. Here East London harboured its aristocracy, secluded from immediate contact with meaner streets. The houses were roomy and lofty, of the kind—where there was a deficient supply of daughters—to require a couple of servants in aprons and mob-caps; and Markham, observing that the establishments were such as to require a fairly substantial income for their maintenance, shrewdly conjectured that Mr. Custer, who had no doubt appeared to this neighbourhood to be eminently respectable, must have found the pro-

fession of jewel thieving to be one of very considerable profit.

By dint of judicious inquiry Charlotte Kaufmann discovered the house in the Square which had enjoyed the doubtful honour of sheltering Mr. Custer while he yet remained the breathing tenant of his own earthly tabernacle, but she did not immediately make her way to it. She walked to the end of the terrace, and turned the corner which formed the flank to a range of back gardens.

‘Now, you see,’ she said, indicating the gardens, ‘there is no way out here. Do you still trust me?’

‘Yes—but why?’ Markham inquired, mystified as to her meaning.

‘I am going in,’ she explained briefly, ‘and I think it better to go alone.’

‘But you may not know exactly what I want,’ he ventured to suggest.

‘Yes, I do,’ she answered confidently. ‘You hope to find something which will give you a clue. You could only do that by posing as an acquaintance, whose business with Custer has been upset by his death, and by suggesting that you would like to have a look at his papers to see whether you could find the particulars for finishing the undertaking in hand. Well, I can do that as well as you ; two of us would perhaps spoil everything.’

I dare say you have a hope, too, that you would possibly get a trace of the jewels; but you wouldn't succeed in doing that.'

'Why?' asked Markham, puzzled by her confidence.

'Because the jewels wouldn't be there, and Custer wouldn't keep any trace of them there,' she amplified with certitude. 'Besides, the police have been there, that is certain. His wife would take good care of the papers, but she will show them to me. Do you agree? You can still play your own cards if I fail.'

Some indefinable effluence of the woman inspired his confidence, and he had no doubt of her sincerity.

'I said I would do whatever you suggested,' he replied frankly.

'Very well,' she rejoined. 'Don't pass the house, but wait at the corner, and watch for me to come out. I will be with you again in a quarter of an hour.'

Markham followed her with his eyes until she entered the house, and then he fell to pondering over the strangeness of his adventure. He was wondering who this Charlotte Kaufmann might be, and what might be the nature of her interest in the late Mr. Custer, when, within the stipulated quarter of an hour, she reappeared from the house.

‘Well,’ he inquired eagerly, as she rejoined him, ‘have you discovered anything?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, he thought a little grimly.

‘What is it?’ he asked again, his interest intensifying.

‘Give me three days, and I will tell you, or show you, all you wish to know,’ she replied, speaking as confidently as she had done before.

His interest gave place to chagrin.

‘Cannot you tell me now?’ he asked, in a tone of mingled protest and disappointment.

‘No,’ she answered with decision; ‘I must enlarge and confirm what I have discovered. I may do that in a day; I shall certainly do it in three. Where can I communicate with you privately when I am ready?’

‘At the Ermine Club,’ he replied a little unwillingly.

‘Then I will send you a note there,’ she promised promptly.

‘Very well,’ he agreed reluctantly. ‘And what are you going to do now?’

‘Return to Hyde Park Gardens,’ she announced, in a tone which seemed to anticipate his amazement.

‘Hyde Park Gardens!’ he exclaimed in astonishment.

‘Yes; why not?’ she answered, smiling a little

mysteriously and cynically. 'I have no doubt you have heard of Wolff Goldberg ; I am his sister-in-law. No,' she added, anticipating Markham's question, 'he knows nothing of this, and what I am telling you is in confidence. So please do not mention this evening's business to anyone. If I am quick I shall be back in time to change for dinner. We may as well take a cab together.'

Markham acquiesced, and in infinite amazement began a journey which had its ending for him at the Marble Arch. There he took leave of his strangely-met companion, paid the cabman his fare, and hailed another hansom to convey him, still in a state of wonderment, to Cadogan Terrace.

In her room at Hyde Park Gardens, a few minutes later, Charlotte Kaufmann took a sheet of written paper from within the breast of her jacket. She studied it with a light in her eyes which seemed to suggest that with the handwriting upon it she was, or had been, greatly familiar.

CHAPTER XXIII

WALLS THAT GIVE FORTH DIAMONDS

FOR Charlotte Kaufmann the day which followed her adventitious alliance with Richard Markham in the East End was one of much riding in cabs, of much travelling on foot, and of long waiting on pavements near the thresholds of offices, which she watched without entering—a day, in short, of ceaseless activity, of infinite cautiousness, and of inexhaustible patience.

She was following and observing the man whom Joseph Custer had known by the name of Stephen Elgarth.

Her labour, like her cautiousness and patience, was unending. Many times in the bustling streams of street corners she missed her quarry, but fortune seemed to have enlisted in her service, and presently she found him again. He was a man of various engagements and of many calls, but at last his appointments seemed to be at an end, and, deserting the City's region

of finance, he pursued his way towards Cripplegate.

Then the huntress in Charlotte banished her fatigue, and she became a keen creature of sleuth. Instinct apprised her that she was nearing the end of her dogging.

Elgarth approached Cripplegate Church, and she read in his body that he was moving with caution. Twice he paused to look at the window displays of shops. She knew the action for an excuse to glance backward, but she never paused in her own progress upon the opposite side of the way. She was mistress of her craft, and she made no such mistake.

A few moments later Stephen Elgarth disappeared, and Charlotte Kaufmann saw that the place of his vanishment was Jewin Street.

Still she went forward, and suddenly the mouth of Jewin Crescent opened to her. Then came swift inspiration. She increased her speed, and passed the entry to the Crescent at its western end. A glance up the thoroughfare revealed to her all that she wished to know.

Stephen Elgarth was entering a house which she would have no difficulty in knowing again.

A few moments later she retraced her steps from the end of Jewin Street, and presently she stood looking, with strangely mingled feelings,

and with not less strangely compounded curiosity, at the names upon the doorposts of No. 113, Jewin Crescent.

‘Very well, Stephen Elgarth,’ she said to herself with inward bitterness, a bitterness which seemed to spring from the fountain of a remembrance of the long ago; ‘you learnt your foul trade from Jacob Cohen: a daughter of Jacob Cohen will improve the teaching.’

Then she returned to Jewin Street, and watched for the coming of Stephen Elgarth. An hour passed before she saw him drift into the flood-tide of Aldersgate Street; but, although she keenly followed him with her eyes until he disappeared from view, she no longer pursued him with her steps. For yet another quarter of an hour she waited; and then, being confident that he had forgotten nothing, and would not unexpectedly return, she again entered Jewin Crescent.

This time she did not pause outside the door of No. 113, but unhesitatingly entered the house, and ascended the stairs to the third floor. There, before the door upon which was painted the name of ‘Stephen Elgarth, Foreign Agent,’ she produced from her pocket a bunch of curiously-fashioned keys. Knowing their ignoble history, she had often wondered why she had continued

to keep them ; but now she was grimly glad that she had retained them in her possession.

She inserted one key into the lock, and then tried another, following it with yet another ; and presently the door yielded to the persuasion of her talismanic agents.

Entering the room, she locked the door behind her ; then she took from her pocket a piece of wax candle, to which she applied a match, and a moment later she was curiously surveying the room. She went first to the pedestal of the safe, stooped and felt beneath it, and upward, with her hand.

‘The same,’ she said to herself with grim quietness ; ‘exactly the same—just as my poor mother described to me my father’s. When Jacob Cohen wanted a useful instrument, and found you, Stephen Elgarth, he taught you very well. Asbestos,’ she continued, transferring her attention to the grate ; ‘yes, it is an ingenious, almost infallible plan. Few people would think of connecting the fireplace with the safe ; I should never have done so if my poor mother had not told me the story of the miserable business before she died. I’ll be bound you don’t give much need for that grate to be cleaned out ; no scraps of paper, no flung matches—no, I thought not—as clean as a whistle, but a thousand times less innocent.’

Having reached the end of these reflections, Charlotte Kaufmann turned next to the desk in the centre of the room. All its drawers were carefully locked, and she therefore again made use of her bunch of unfamiliar keys. Some minutes were spent before she succeeded in finding a key of sufficient mastery to open the drawers; but, the key being found, she rapidly examined the drawers one by one. The greatest surprise lying in wait for her she found in the top drawer of the series upon the left-hand side of the table.

The only contents of the drawer were a sealed, addressed, and stamped envelope, and a written sheet of notepaper. Charlotte Kaufmann withdrew the paper and read the words:

‘In the event of accident to me, the searcher of this room is particularly requested to forward the letter in this drawer to the person to whom it is addressed.—S. E.’

‘His son,’ she said to herself bitterly. Then she took the letter from the drawer, and placed it within the breast of her jacket. ‘Perhaps you are repentant in this letter, Stephen Elgarth,’ she added quietly. ‘I think the time is come for your redemption.’

The other furniture in the room, the trunk

under the window alone excepted, seemed not to interest her ; for, having closed and locked the drawer, she extinguished the candle, wrapped it, with the burnt match, in the piece of paper in which she had carried it, and returned it to her pocket.

Then she left the room, locked the door behind her, and hastened from the house. Her destination was not Hyde Park Gardens, but St. Martin's-le-Grand. From the General Post Office she despatched a telegram to Richard Markham, at the Ermine Club :

‘ If at club, come at once. Will wait portico of G.P.O. till six-thirty.—C. K.’

She had nearly an hour to wait, but her patience was inexhaustible. At twenty minutes past six o'clock came her reward. A hansom cab ran alongside the pavement in front of the portico, and she saw Richard Markham preparing to alight from it. In a moment she had hurried down the steps, and had stopped him in the act.

‘ Don't leave the cab,’ she checked him quickly ; ‘ I am coming in with you. Corner of Jewin Street,’ she added to the cabman, and in another instant the cab was again in motion.

‘ Well,’ he inquired with cordial animation, ‘ I

haven't lost a moment in coming. What is the mystery? You have been quicker than you thought you would be.'

'Yes,' she replied in a strange, dry tone, 'I have been quicker than I thought I should be. Are you engaged to the lady in whom you said you were interested?'

'You have rightly interpreted the word "interested," and have guessed shrewdly,' he laughed. 'Yes, I am engaged to her.'

'Then I am sorry,' she rejoined enigmatically, yet with a note of almost maternal pity in her tone.

'Sorry!' he exclaimed in puzzlement. 'Why sorry?'

Her answer was not less peculiar than her original remark, nor was her manner less strangely subdued.

'I like you in the little that I've seen of you,' she remarked quietly and frankly, 'and I should like you to be free from disappointment and trouble.'

Markham looked at her in bewilderment, and as he looked her words seemed to sever themselves from connection with her previous speech, and to come from her lips mechanically.

'Your heart's desire is to restore the lost diamonds to your *fiancée*,' she observed simply. 'Well, I think I can show them to you.'

‘Where—what?’ he exclaimed disjunctedly, in suddenly excited eagerness. ‘The diamonds!’

‘That you shall see in a few minutes,’ she replied briefly, as the cab came to a standstill at the corner of Jewin Street. ‘Will you pay the cabman?’

Markham complied with her instruction, and then accompanied her to the unfamiliar scene of Jewin Crescent. He was full of wonderment as to the revelations that might be in store for him, and his curiosity did not lessen when Charlotte Kaufmann led him through the open door of No. 113, and preceded him up the stairs to the third floor of the house. As for his companion, she saw that his glance was directed inquiringly at her bunch of curious keys.

‘You may smile at these,’ she observed undisguisedly. ‘This is not their usual work. They are mine by inheritance.’

A reply to her invitation was not ready on Markham’s lips, and before words were again spoken Charlotte Kaufmann had passed into the room, motioning him to follow. As soon as she had closed and locked the door she turned and spoke to him in a tone of quiet concentration.

‘Now, Mr. Markham,’ she said, ‘you will have to do some work. If I am not mistaken, the diamonds, which you so much desire to recover,

are in this room. But before we get to work I have one stipulation to make. You must not return the diamonds, nor any other jewels that you may recognise here, until after the last post to-morrow night. I trust your word. Will you make me that promise ?

‘I should regard myself very poorly if I refused to make you that promise, and I should consider myself contemptible if I failed to keep it,’ Markham replied frankly.

‘Thanks,’ she rejoined simply. ‘I have my own reasons for making the request. Now we will get to work.’

‘Isn’t it rather too dark for work ?’ he queried in a mildly jocose vein.

‘We must work in the dark until we have finished the principal business,’ she announced methodically. ‘But stay a moment,’ she added, with remembrance, ‘there was a rug here a little while ago—here it is ; stand on that trunk, and see whether you can fix it across the window.’

Markham once again responded to her generalship, and, groping with his hands along the top of the window-frame, he found four nails upon which to hang the rug. Then, the room being in darkness, Charlotte Kaufmann struck a match and again lit her candle.

‘Now,’ she directed briefly, ‘you must begin

by removing the asbestos from that grate. No,' she remarked, answering his look of astonishment, 'you need not wonder. It is not a device of my invention. It is a secret that I learnt from one who has long been dead and gone.'

In a few moments the grate was bare of its contents, and Markham looked up for further instructions.

'I don't know how the fire-back is fixed,' she intimated, 'but lift it, or push it in some way. It only requires some persuasion to come out. You will find the thing we want behind it.'

A sliding motion which Markham gave to the fire-clay failed.

'It is evidently a lift,' he observed. 'By Jove! yes,' he added, as the shield loosened in his hand.

Then he withdrew from the cavity a winding-key.

'That is the thing we want,' remarked Charlotte Kaufmann, almost impassively. 'Now,' she went on, 'feel under the pedestal of this safe; you will find a pivot which the key is made to work. You will soon see which way it turns.'

Once again Markham obeyed Charlotte Kaufmann's instructions. His curiosity merged into amazement as the safe began to descend, but his directress still gave no sign of agitation. Her

eyes were set rigidly upon the safe, her lips were tightly compressed, and her whole pose and expression seemed to be suggestive of a half-pitiful, half-bitter inflexibility.

When Markham had finished his task he rose from his stooping position, and, following the gaze of his companion, he looked with fresh amazement at the cavity in the wall which the safe had concealed.

‘Well, of all the tricks!’ he exclaimed, bereft for the moment of more expressive speech. ‘If this doesn’t beat an Act of Parliament!’

‘You had better look inside,’ she observed in a tone strangely calm. ‘As I said just now, if I am not mistaken, you should find what you want there. Do you know the diamonds?’

‘No,’ he answered truthfully, ‘they were coming from the Cape, you know. Nobody in England has seen them yet, except—the interesting gentleman who occupies this room.’

‘Well, you had better get them out, at any rate,’ she directed, in the same strangely level tone.

Markham needed no second bidding. He groped with an eager hand in the ingenious cavity, and with the first thing that he brought forth he vented an almost betraying cry of exultation. He held in his hand a small wooden box,

within which, nestled in wool, were five magnificent diamonds of abnormal size and a number of other stones of lesser weight and value.

'This must be them!' he exclaimed, violating grammar in his jubilant excitement. 'Don't you think so?'

'Is there no mark?' she inquired, still without emotion.

'Apparently not,' he replied, his enthusiasm a little damped.

'Feel again,' she advised; 'there may be something there to identify them.'

Markham seized upon the hint with alacrity; and at the second withdrawal he produced a canvas wrapper, upon which was stamped the initial letters 'E.A.' and the numerals '999.'

'Does it exactly fit the box?' she asked, indicating the wrapper.

'Exactly,' he declared, again becoming exultant.

'Then they are yours—or rather your *fiancée's*,' she affirmed. '"E.A." is the steamship *East Anglia*.'

'By Jove—yes!' he exclaimed with recognition. 'That settles it without a doubt. And I have to thank you for all this,' he added, with cordial gratitude and appreciation.

'You need not thank me,' she returned vaguely; 'you have no necessity. I only hope that you

will always think as well of me as you do now,' she concluded ; but Markham was too cheerfully engrossed with his success to note the mysteriousness in her tone.

'They are beauties !' he remarked in admiration, as he flashed the gems in the candle-light.

'And were put there "to sweat," as it is called, until the occupier of this room could safely smuggle them across the Channel to Vienna, or Antwerp, or Amsterdam. It's a select and exclusive trade,' she commented ironically. 'But we cannot remain here much longer,' she rallied. 'You had better see whether there is anything else you can recognise in there ; and then we must replace everything and go.'

Markham again explored the cunning hollow in the wall with his hand, and brought forth a Russia leather case containing a collar of pearls, with a diamond and emerald pendant, and a small bundle wrapped in American cloth and securely bound and sealed. He first opened the jewel-case, and gave a little gasp of surprise.

'Tchah !' he ejaculated. 'Lady Diana Lindley's collar ! The very thing we were speaking about after dinner the other night.'

'If you know it you may take it. The late illegal owner will have no further use for it,' she remarked in a curiously dry tone.

'I should like to restore it to her,' he responded with appreciation. 'It was stolen from Kingston Hill some fortnight ago. May I open this?' he added, indicating the bundle.

'I know nothing about it; but you may as well open it,' she rejoined agreeably.

He broke the seals, and, as he spread the folds of the cloth upon the surface of the writing-table, he uttered yet another startled exclamation.

'Beelzebub!' he cried, almost aloud; and then as quickly added: 'Pardon me, Mrs. Kaufmann—but wonder and mystery don't cease here. The Leslie heirlooms—that's what these jewels are! Bob and Nibs will be delighted with this.'

'Who is Nibs?' she asked in a curiously detached tone.

'Nibs? She's my sister; she's engaged to Lord Robert Leslie, you know,' he explained lightly.

For a moment the light in Charlotte Kaufmann's eyes deadened to coldness; her lips tightened, and her expression hardened. Then a throe of violent impulsion seemed to pass through her frame.

'Take them,' she said in a dull, strained voice; and she abruptly turned away, her hands clenching convulsively, and her body quivering with emotion.

‘Are you ill?’ inquired Markham solicitously.

‘No, no; I am not ill,’ she disclaimed hastily.

‘Your speaking of engagements reminded me of a vow that I had made affecting my own life—that is all. Is there anything more in the hole?’

‘No; nothing,’ he answered simply.

‘Very well,’ she decided briefly; ‘we had better go.’

In a few minutes the room was restored to the state in which Stephen Elgarth had left it. Then his unsuspected visitors quitted the house, and presently they were once more travelling westward together.

Markham, his spirits buoyant with success, was quick with the humour to be talkative; but his companion was singularly thoughtful and reticent.

‘Do you know the man who occupies that room?’ he asked when the cab in which they rode was well started upon its journey. ‘Is he a foreigner, do you think?’ he added, remembering her reference to cities of the Continent.

Her answer was vague and unsatisfying.

‘When we first met,’ she said, in a tone that seemed to Markham to be curiously and mechanically grim, ‘you paid me the compliment of telling me that I looked honest. Well, I will now return the compliment by saying the same thing to you. You have made me two

promises—the first, that you will not speak of me to anyone ; the second, that you will retain the jewellery, and will not restore it until after the last post to-morrow night. I believe you will keep both promises. What you want to know you shall learn by the last post to-morrow night.'

This was all the information that she vouchsafed to him, and for the remainder of the journey she was strangely spiritless and silent.

CHAPTER XXIV

A REUNION OF FIRE

IF love realized is the wine of woman, love denied and violated is her gall and wormwood.

It was even so with Charlotte Kaufmann. Bitterness had become to her as the chief element in her life ; and when her eyes opened to the empty monotony of another day they were heavy with the dulness of unrefreshing slumber, and her soul was weary with womanly cravings, which the callous earth refused to satisfy.

What was her life? What did she possess to make her life worth living?

She answered the persistent self-questioning as she had answered it many times before. And her weary reply was—‘ Nothing !’

Until Basil Markham had again crossed her path she had existed in a state in which her despoiled and destitute nature had become cata-

and she might have continued so to live.

But now all dormancy was at an end. Consciousness of the lost heritage of her womanhood was revived within her, with a poignancy increased a thousandfold by the cruelty of reawakening. All the qualities natural to her sex, claiming her woman's portion of hope, desire, and fulfilment, yet ruinously wronged, downthrown, and laid waste, were reanimated in her bosom ; but they would take no ease, would accept no amelioration. There was no balm in Gilead for her, and the rankling wound in her soul made sour all her milk of human kindness.

The forenoon was still young when she sat down to a table in her room to write a letter. She used plain notepaper and a plain envelope, and she wrote :

‘ DEAR SIR,

‘ If you wish to capture the prime instigator of the recent jewel robberies in the West End, look for him in Jewin Crescent to-night, between four and six o'clock.’

‘ Shall I give them the number?’ she mused grimly. ‘ No ; they are sure to take him, but I will give him that chance. It will do him good to feel the hunt.’

Then she added to her letter the words :

‘Though this note, for various reasons, is anonymous, it comes from one who has discovered the person principally concerned in the thefts, and who has proved the correctness of the information which is now offered to the police.’

The note written, she placed and sealed it in the envelope, which she addressed to the ‘Director of the Criminal Investigation Department, Great Scotland Yard, S.W.’

A quarter of an hour later she dropped the note into a postal letter-box, grimly reflecting that her action was now beyond recall.

The morning dragged its length slowly along, and there was no health, no interest, in it. She seemed to be living, and moving, and acting in a state apart from herself.

When the afternoon came she again sat down to write. Her writing-paper and envelope were as plain as those which she had used in the morning, but she no longer chose to veil her identity. The image of Richard Markham was in her mind, and she wrote :

‘DEAR MR. MARKHAM,

‘Last night I promised you that by the last post to-night I would make you acquainted with the facts which you wished to know with

regard to the occupier of 113, Jewin Crescent. I am now keeping my promise, as I believe you have kept yours. I am accompanying this note with a letter, which I think will reveal and explain all that you wish to know. Our acquaintanceship has been brief, and in this uncertain life we may never meet again. If such should be the case, I would accompany the parting with all good wishes for your future welfare, honour, and happiness. Keep a true, upright, and chivalrous heart ; be brave, and fear not.

‘Sincerely yours,

‘C. K.’

Why she wrote the last few lines she hardly knew, but they were symptomatic of her psychic condition. For the moment her whole being was an echo of the mystic uncertainty of life. A pathetic sense of the unforeknowable filled her soul.

Again she dressed, and went out into the world of high-day and of self-engrossed people. She knew that she was unlike and alone ; that, with all the world around her, she had nothing in common with it—no bond of fellowship, no husband, no children, no ties of kith and kin to her heartstrings, no sweetness and allurements of home—nothing ! In the crowd of moving men

and women, each rich with the domestic claims, the interests, and the associations of human life, she walked alone, with a heart torn and seared, and with a soul riven by the heavy iron of a cruel fate.

She walked alone!

And as she walked eastward she thought of all that should have been in the current of her life. She thought of Basil Markham, and of the broken link with him that could never be repaired. Her vivid fancy seemed to trace the mark left by his shattering hand; and, as she looked upon it, her martyred happiness cried out against him—cried out, and yet mingled with its cry a note of inarticulate pity.

And the pity was vaguely for him. For, while her bitterness was in arms against him, she knew that his life was vain, and that he tasted no happiness.

She still went eastward, until at last she again came to St. Martin's-le-Grand. At the General Post Office she posted her two letters, and then she walked towards Jewin Street, feeling herself become strangely blank and weary.

Her goal was the modest office of Stephen Elgarth, and presently she was again ascending to the third floor of 113, Jewin Crescent. Strange thoughts flitted through her mind as she stood

for a moment upon the empty landing before the closed door.

‘All hope abandon, ye who enter here.’

Why the phrase came strangely and shadow-wise into her brief contemplation she did not know ; but, like a cloud, it drifted, and she felt the effect of its over-passing fall dully upon her spirits.

Taking her keys from her pocket, she unlocked the door and entered the room. The light was failing, but she saw at once that the place was without human presence. She closed the door and locked it, and, having replaced the keys in her pocket, she crossed the floor to the spot in which Richard Markham had left the carefully refolded rug on the preceding evening.

‘He has not been here yet,’ she said to herself ; and then she returned to the wall beside the door, and seated herself in a chair, to wait for Stephen Elgarth’s coming.

The shadows of the room deepened into darkness, and the black silence fell upon her, affecting her with weird and sombre emotions. She wondered dimly what would be the end of this strange eddy in the stream of her life. She could see no further than that presently Stephen Elgarth would come. Of that event she had no doubt. But all

other things beyond were impenetrably dark and blank.

So she sat musing, and in musing passed an hour.

Then came to her ear the sound of swift, light, stealthy feet ascending the stairs. She compressed her lips and clenched her fingers spasmodically. The moment for which she had been waiting had come.

The door of the room was quickly thrown open by a man who, turning instantly he was across the threshold, rapidly closed and locked it behind him. Then, unobservant of the sitter in the dusky corner behind him, he sank into the writing-chair against the table, with his face towards the window, as if grateful for the chamber's friendly, if possibly brief, defence.

'Thank God for that!' he murmured, with a breath of relief. 'They are Scotland Yard men, all four of them . . . and there's little doubt what they want here. . . . Too late to turn back ; they would have had me for certain, if I had. . . . Know the white feather too well. . . . But I think I was just in time to prevent their seeing which house I entered.'

For some moments he sat breathing heavily in the silent gloom ; he was evidently thinking.

'At last!' he said to himself, breaking the

brief pause. 'After all these years it's come—at last!'

'At last!' echoed Charlotte Kaufmann sombrely behind him.

With a nervous shock the man started from his chair, and faced the dim corner in which Charlotte Kaufmann was seated. For a moment he was bereft of speech; but, as he stood peering with a startled stare, Charlotte Kaufmann filled the pause.

'They are after you, Stephen Elgarth—at last!' she said with peculiarly deliberate communicativeness, and with strangely grim expressiveness, as she spoke his name.

'You!' he returned bitterly through the gloom. 'Then this is your doing; I might have known it would come.'

'Perhaps you did know—perhaps your heart smote you—at last,' she rejoined in a hollow, warmthless tone.

'This is your doing,' he repeated with added bitterness, as if his thoughts had been winging their way through the bygone years to a happier time, and he had not heard her speech. 'Your doing!'

She heard him take the keys from his pocket, and open the drawer in which he had deposited the letter that he had written with the design that it should be forwarded to his son. She heard his

fingers tracing across the empty bottom. But she did not speak.

‘Gone!’ he said to himself in a dull, low tone, as if he had become oblivious of his companion’s presence.

He mechanically closed the drawer and returned the keys to his pocket; and for some moments he sat looking at the window in the attitude of a man whose mind had been whipped until it had become too numb with soreness to think. But presently he spoke again, almost involuntarily, as if he were addressing an imaginary, rather than a real, presence.

‘You have been here before,’ he said huskily. ‘How did you get in?’

Charlotte Kaufmann sat watching his dark figure silhouetted against the window; but she made no answer.

‘I can guess, I think,’ he went on gloomily. ‘A daughter of Jacob Cohen would perhaps have the means, and know the way.’

As he spoke, Stephen Elgarth rose again from his chair, and turned towards his silent companion. She thought that he was about to approach her with some vengeful design in his mind, but he paused at the safe and placed his hand upon it.

‘Gone, too, perhaps?’ he said in a strained, inquiring voice.

She understood his meaning, but she still remained silent.

‘I thought so,’ he observed in the same strangled tone.

Charlotte Kaufmann could not see his face, but she knew that he was looking at her with darkened eyes as he stood before her—that a tearing gale of emotion was making havoc in his mind.

He returned slowly to his chair and dropped lethargically into it, like a man outworn by exhaustion. From below-stairs presently came the noise of many shuffling feet; and although Charlotte Kaufmann was unfamiliar with the sound, she knew that the workpeople of Cambers and Burrs were cheerfully deserting labour for the day. A few minutes later the sound of a banging door smote upward from the ground floor; and then silence reigned in the house, deep and unbroken.

Stephen Elgarth still sat in his chair, motionless and unnoting, as if his ears had ceased to hear and his mind had passed into the void of abstraction. Yet, as she shared the strange muteness with him, Charlotte Kaufmann knew that he was still thinking, and that his soul was struggling in its besetting toils.

Presently he rose from his chair and moved cautiously towards that side of the window-frame

from which he could obtain a glimpse of the western outlet of the Crescent; but he evidently drew no encouragement from the survey, for he returned to his chair more cheerlessly than he had left it.

‘And you have come to see the end of your handiwork,’ he said when he had been reseated a few moments. He spoke as if to himself, or as if he mechanically obeyed the prompting of the passing thought to give it voice, and to address it to an inflicter of injury who was not in bodily presence, but who was removed to a vague far distance.

There was no cowardice in the tone; but through it sounded a note of mingled irony and pathos, which quickened an indefinable tremulous emotion in Charlotte Kaufmann’s own bosom. But her silence remained unbroken. She had cast the die, and had come hither to see the end. Even the thought that it was strange that she should be sitting there with the man whom she had never expected to see again, whom she had once loved as her affianced husband, did not take shape in her brain. Life and death had seemed to become as abstractions which had been withdrawn from her mortal interest. She had no joy in living; she would have no regret in dying. She had come to see the end!

And so these two, who should have been man and wife together, sat in drifted, miserable silence—life-wrecks stranded upon the shore of hopeless, piteous time.

Stephen Elgarth made no attempt to depart from his gloomy asylum. He knew that Charlotte Kaufmann had given to the police the descriptive material which would enable them to instantly identify him ; but his harried mind had not yet wondered why his lurking enemies did not come straightway to his lair. Suddenly the thought presented itself to him.

‘Did you give them the number?’ he asked hoarsely, knowing that he could learn only by inquiring, and forcing himself to speak with difficulty.

She did not answer him, and he repeated the question.

‘No,’ she replied dully.

‘I understand,’ he commented in a tone of miserable bitterness ; ‘I understand. Simply the street, without the number—it meant exquisite torment for me. . . . Oh, woman!’ he broke off in a torn voice, ‘why did you do it? I have no fear of consequences for myself—what I do, and must pay for, I risk with full knowledge, and I’m ready to pay—but I would have spared my children,’ he went on disjointedly. ‘They know

nothing—they have never hurt you. I wronged you—God knows I know it. But haven't I suffered—haven't I paid? Didn't you punish me enough the other night? Didn't you see that I had marred my own life as well as yours—that I not only still loved you, but loved you with all the increase of the accumulated, broken years? Can't you see it now?

Charlotte Kaufmann had closed the door of her pity; but now, as she listened to Stephen Elgarth's stricken speech, as she heard the rack in his broken voice, her bosom quivered with pain, as if spurned and outcast compassion were beating at the sullen door of her pity, and would not be denied. It was painful sweetness to know that after all this falling man loved her, that he had suffered for his own faithless folly and wrongdoing.

'I could kill you for what you have done,' he went on again presently. 'What would be easier? I have you here at my mercy. Then why don't I do it? Because I can't—because I can't. Your father first gave me the idea to be what I am; but can I hate his daughter? No—God witness me, no. . . . Charlotte!' he broke off with sudden, strainful vehemence, 'why did you do it? Why——'

† the word was choked in utterance, and it

expired in a beaten groan. The violence of Stephen Elgarth's agitation had overmastered him, and he rose from his chair in vain search of relief from the conflicting emotions which assailed him. Charlotte Kaufmann, with all her womanhood besieged by memories which would not perish, by reawakened yearnings which would not be repulsed, and by bitterness which would not be divested of its new-found quality of poignant regret, could see his figure outlined by the faint light in the window as he paced across the room, and she knew that he was bent and bowed, and that he was heavy with ruin and disaster in every limb. Presently he paused well back from the betraying window, and stood looking at the dim, slumbrous roofs upon the opposite side of the street. She knew that he looked without discerning, and she could see that his body was shaken, like a mountain shocked by earthquake—a strong man broken, a column toppling to its fall.

Then all the bitterness sank in her heart, and in its place welled forth a sudden flood of tenderness and pity. She rose quietly from her chair, looked at her companion hesitatingly a moment, and then went impulsively towards him.

'Oh, Basil—Basil!' she cried remorsefully in her advance; 'I have destroyed you—destroyed

you!' And, as she spoke, she flung her arms around his neck, and hid her face in his breast.

For a moment he looked at her blankly in the darkness; then the man in him overpowered all other considerations, and he took her into his arms.

'You call me Basil, not Elgarth, now,' he said brokenly. 'Yes, you have destroyed me—just when I was working to break loose from it all. Would that you had called me Basil the other night! I would have confessed and told you all then. But come and sit down, Charlotte.'

He led her to the chair which he had vacated, and placed her in it. Then she watched him curiously and dumbly as he veiled his face and hands, and with infinite cautiousness shut out with his ingenious rug the faint glimmering which came through the window from the gas-lamp in the street below. Presently he lit the gas, and then they again looked into each other's faces, pallid now, and drawn with cruel emotion. Neither of them had heart for conversation, but in a little while she broke the silence.

'What will you do?' she asked in a nerveless voice.

'There is nothing to do except wait,' he returned dully. 'Perhaps there may be a moment for getting away safely after twelve, or

before business begins in the morning ; but I have little hope of it.'

'I told them between four and six in the evening,' she confessed piteously, with downcast head.

'They are still watching,' he rejoined in the same dull tone as before. 'The prize is too big to be quickly abandoned. But you may go, Charlotte. It will probably betray me, but I will take whatever happens.'

'I shall stay with you, Basil,' she announced simply.

He lit the gas-burners under the stove, and kindled the asbestos in the grate ; and, foodless and forlorn, seated each beside the hearth, they kept their miserable vigil.

Two hours of this strange, pitiful reunion passed into the shadowland of time.

Then a pungent, acrid odour seemed to be subtly making itself perceptible in the close air of the room. At the beginning the lonely, silent pair, each in a separate cloudland of sad reflection, did not give it serious heed ; but presently the atmosphere became cloudy and oppressive, and the acrid fumes became hot and stifling.

They looked inquiringly at each other.

'What is it ?' she asked in a nerveless tone.

Markham rose from his chair, cautiously un-

locked the door, and quietly crept a few steps down the stairs of the silent house. A moment later he bounded back into the room, his eyes dilated, his face distorted and blanched.

‘Good God, Charlotte!’ he cried, appalled; ‘we’re lost—the house is on fire! It’s been burning in the back-room below, and now it’s all burst ablaze. The stairs are alight!’

Even as he spoke the smoke rolled into the room and dimmed the gaslight.

Charlotte Kaufmann rose from her chair with ashen face and trembling lips; but she gave no other sign of fear.

‘Lord!’ he cried again miserably. ‘You must not die, Charlotte.’

‘If death is to come to you, Basil,’ she said with awed quietness and firmness, ‘it shall come to us both. I shall stay with you.’

But although Markham heard her words he was heedless of them.

‘You must not, Charlotte, my poor girl! you must not,’ he kept murmuring brokenly; and in mad haste, with desperate hands, he flung the chairs from the room, and in fearful speed raised them into a pyramid upon the landing. ‘The houses are higher on each side,’ he moaned, ‘but there may be a way to reach their roofs.’

He scrambled to the crown of his frail struc-

ture, and drove his desperate hands against the frame of the skylight in the roof. Beneath him the ruthless flames came leaping with hot, evil lust up the stairs.

Standing in the fierce breath of the fire, Charlotte Kaufmann saw him disappear upon the roof. In a few moments he came falling back.

‘No hope,’ he groaned, ‘no hope! My poor girl, how I have been the wrecker of your life! You must not die—O God, you must not die!’

His answer was an exultant, bursting hiss from the fire. He had given the blazing enemy vent through the skylight in the roof.

He drew his companion into the room, and quickly closed the door. Still the chamber thickened with smoke, and the gas-flame waned in the obscuring murk. Suddenly the feeble glimmer vanished, and he knew that the demoniacal fire had devoured the gas-pipes below. The floor felt hot beneath his feet. Reckless now of detection, he rushed to the window and tore down the rug. Smoke and flame were belching from the windows below. His throat was closing, denying him breath; and his head was bursting, as if with in-pouring fumes, which split and stupefied his senses as they expanded in his heavy, aching brain; but he could hear hoarse cries and

strident shouts, the gathering roar of awe and commotion in the streets without. In his delirium of remorseful pity for the woman whose life he had undone he flung up the window and looked out; but the fierce, pitiless flames from the windows below scorched his face, snatched his breath, and drove him back.

A failing, choking cry sounded behind him, and he staggered from the window, groping blindly, until he stumbled upon the form of the woman he had wronged. He dropped upon his knees beside her.

‘Merciful God!’ he gasped; ‘to think that this should be the end!’

The fiery fiend was hissing and chafing at the door; he could see its evil, glittering tongues, licking and darting in its stream of yellow breath, as it glowed through the chink along the floor.

‘We shall be gone before it reaches us,’ she encouraged him with strengthless, straining voice.

‘If I had but sent the letter—and the jewels,’ he lamented in a struggling groan.

‘Forgive me, Basil,’ she pleaded feebly; ‘I sent the letter this evening. The jewels Richard took away with him last night; he was here—but he did not know.’

‘Thank God for that!’ he moaned devoutly—

'thank God for that. The thing was done before I knew that I should be robbing my own son and daughter. I was keeping—them—to return—but I didn't—know how.'

'Kiss me, Basil,' she presently whispered faintly.

He raised her in his weakening arms, and kissed her with all the pitiful intensity and endearment of a dying passion.

'God have mercy upon us!' she prayed with sinking voice.

'Amen—good Lord—amen!' he gasped weakly, and his head sank down upon the bosom of the woman whose life he had marred without severing it from the fate of his own.

They had ceased to speak, and only the sound of the fire's cracking tongues filled the silent room.

The flames roared on, leapt across the narrow street, swept to right and left and rear, and embraced the builded heart of Cripplegate for Basil Markham's and Charlotte Kaufmann's funeral pyre.

CHAPTER XXV

LAST SCENE OF ALL

DINNER was a late and incomplete meal at Clifton Mansions on the night of the Cripplegate fire. It waited for the gracing countenance of the Honourable Basil, who came not, nor sent to Mrs. Basil any explanation of his discreditable absence.

Mrs. Basil was passing a comparatively quiet evening at home, limiting herself by a self-denying ordinance, which she regarded in the light of a personal virtue, to the entertainment of only three guests—Sir George and Lady Rowley, and Miss Cissie Rowley, to wit—and her vexed concern, inwardly shrewish, but outwardly bland, was baited less by Mr. Basil's inexplicable whereabouts than by her own vanity for her reputation and credit as an unsurpassed hostess.

She gave the Honourable Basil a quarter of an hour in which to appear and redeem his character, then mildly apologized for his absence, and straight-

way dismissed him from her mind, so that he should in no way disturb her alimentary enjoyment nor interfere with her comfortable digestion.

In these things the mother was in strong contrast to the son. Mr. Richard was quiet almost to gravity, so that the affectionate arts of Miss Cissie were needed to rally him to a semblance of cheerful spirit.

Miss Cissie played her part sympathetically and well, and when her attention was not claimed elsewhere Mr. Richard was in things bright and animate all that a prideful and solicitous mistress could desire. But he was conscious that his emotional system was faulty in tone ; he knew that he was under the domination of a depressing influence, the subtlety of which he could not evade, and the cause of which he could not understand.

Towards ten o'clock he was better able to comprehend the peculiarity of his condition ; he became restless and impatient, and he realized that the promised letter which he was expecting to receive from Charlotte Kaufmann, conjoined with his still secret possession of the jewels from Jewin Crescent, had been the potency which had deranged the normal state of his humours. He found himself to be eagerly desirous of hurrying forward the dragging minutes, and when the day's final delivery

of letters was at last received he outraged etiquette by withdrawing himself from the social circle with a shameless lack of apology.

He went quickly to the seclusion of his father's room, and rejected every envelope in his batch of letters in favour of that one which bore the handwriting of a woman. In a few minutes he had opened and read Charlotte Kaufmann's brief note; then, with almost trepid eagerness, he looked for the other missive to which it referred. At the bottom of the small heap of letters he came upon an envelope at the first glance at which he started with vague apprehension.

It was addressed to himself in the familiar handwriting of his father.

For a moment he felt a check upon him, the imposition upon his hand of a cold reluctance to open the letter. He was affected by a dread sense of impending calamity and evil. With an effort he opened the envelope, withdrew the letter, and read :

‘ MY SON,

‘ For some days I have had premonitions that the game at which I have long played is at an end. For that reason I have written and sealed this letter to you, in order that, in the event of any mischance befalling me, it may be forwarded

to you, so that it may make you acquainted with facts which you should know to enable you to adopt such a course in relation to myself, and to the matters herein disclosed, as your wisdom may suggest. I have personally no care for myself, for, having chosen to take risks, I have the practical sense to be prepared to pay for them without puerilely lamenting my having to take the consequences, although those consequences would mean my social downfall and my ignominious punishment. But I have no wish that you, or your sister, should lose caste or suffer through my fault; and it is to avert such a possibility that I have written this letter—or confession you may call it, if you will.

‘ You will wonder what the game is to which I refer. It is an old and long story, but I will state it briefly. It is a story which arises out of a misguided, reckless, extravagant, and, I may confess, profligate youth. Begun in recklessness, it had to be continued from necessity. My personal allowance from my father was small, but it was as much as he could afford. I need not say that I largely exceeded it, and became ruinously involved. The way out of the toils presented itself to me when one Jacob Cohen died. I had made the acquaintance of this man at the Umbra Club, which was not conducted with the advice of the

police, and which was never fully awake until past the hour of midnight. A strange mutual attraction was set up between us ; we became familiar ; he drew me into many of his schemes, as a tool, no doubt, at first, but afterwards as a familiar confidant ; and I learned, in a kind of left-handed partnership, the secrets of his trade. I will confess the nature of that trade at once—it was the large and profitable one of a receiver of stolen jewels.

‘ His death to me was a temptation—it opened to me the opportunity of taking up the succession to his business. I do not extenuate my conduct ; I was driven to find some way out of my entanglements ; I could not relinquish my excesses. I took the opportunity, and stepped into Jacob Cohen’s empty shoes. That I flourished at the business there is no need to say. I far out-Cohened Cohen, having advantages such as he never possessed, and opportunities for promoting thievish business such as he never dreamt of my having at command, he having never known me as other than a nonentity of the name of Gerald Marston. My position in society enabled me to obtain knowledge of the best jewels, and all the great jewel robberies of past years have been effected upon my information by agents acting under my instructions. I have had ex-

traordinary fortune ; and, although the police have been endeavouring to trace the author of the robberies for years, I have never had more than one alias, namely, "Stephen Elgarth, Foreign Agent," carrying on business at Jewin Crescent, from which address I indite this letter. In many respects the description of "foreign agent" is not inapt, inasmuch as my periodical journeys to the Continent were connected with my business in dispersing my goods in various cities—Vienna, Brussels, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Paris being chief, and Berlin, St. Petersburg, and Rome being second in order.

‘But of the story I have said enough. In that which I am now about to set down I do not seek to palliate past mischief ; I write it only that you may understand my state of mind at the time of writing, and may give to the purpose which has produced that state of mind such credit as it may deserve. As you know, I have for some years been cultivating the field of company directorship and finance. A little later, I have no doubt, I should have increased my operations to the extent necessary to satisfy my requirements, and then I should have relinquished my illicit business—which I do not deny has had a fascination for me—for good and all.

‘The matter to which I have next to refer is

one of direct personal interest to yourself. I have at this address Sir George Rowley's diamonds, the Leslie jewels, and Lady Diana Lindley's pearl collar. So far as Sir George's diamonds are concerned, the mischief was done before I knew that you had set your heart upon making Cicely Rowley your wife. The case of the Leslie jewels is slightly different. They were stolen, as you know, some time ago, when I had no dreaming that Robert Leslie would win your sister's affection, and would seek to become my son-in-law. By good fortune I had not removed the jewels to the Continent when that event happened. I have been anxious to restore not only Rowley's diamonds and the Leslie jewels, but also Lady Lindley's collar ; but as yet the safe way of doing so has not presented itself to me. My wish is, therefore, that when you receive this letter you should endeavour to quietly recover the property. If you remove the fire-clay back of the stove in this room, you will find a winding key, which fits a pivot working under the pedestal of the safe standing against the wall. By turning the pivot with the key the safe can be lowered, and the wall behind it exposed. In the space thus uncovered you will find a cavity in the wall, and in the cavity you will find the jewellery. I have enclosed herewith a typewritten note, which will,

I think, veil my identity, and will enable you to restore the property without any appearance of singularity. I would suggest that it would not have been impossible for a messenger to have left a packet containing the jewellery at your chambers in the Temple. Meanwhile, the property shall remain here in security.

‘And now comes the worst part of my task. I must confess that I am not without blood-guiltiness. My principal agent was a man of the name of Joseph Custer. I had given him information of the approach of Rowley’s diamonds from the Cape in the Leadenhall liner *East Anglia*, but he acknowledged having lost my note at a place to which he was accustomed to resort with birds of a similar feather to himself. Custer was murdered on the afternoon of the evening on which our dinner-party discussed the mystery of the jewel robberies. As Custer was a desperate man, I had little doubt that he had been killed by the finder of my note. I saw the danger with which I was menaced—the possibility of my communication having fallen into the hands of a bungler, the chance of his being run to earth, and the further possibility of my handwriting being found in his possession—and I saw that I must act. The murder of Custer convinced me that my cryptic letter to him had been de-

ciphered. I went to Southampton, as you know, on the day of Gunning's arrival there in the *East Anglia*. My ostensible purpose was business, and some business I did indeed despatch; but my real object was to endeavour to get possession of Rowley's diamonds, and to defeat the man who was proposing to reap in Custer's place when the vessel reached the East India Docks. I succeeded in the endeavour, and in so doing I minimized one considerable danger. As the man would find no diamonds, he would become no quarry for the police to hunt. But there was still the risk of his being seized at the docks with my note in his possession, and this mischance I resolved to avert. I went to the docks with the determination of intercepting the man, and of forcing my paper from him. He was already at work when I arrived, half an hour before the time at which I had advised Custer to begin. I was too late to prevent his killing the captain of the ship, of whose murder you have no doubt read; but I chased him, and struck him down with my life-preserver. Although I was prepared to go to fatal lengths if necessary, I did not at that moment intend to kill him; but I found that I had done so, and I discovered that I had ~~taken~~ the life of a man named Samuel Nickens, who had formerly been one of Custer's close intimates.

I recovered my paper from his inner waistcoat pocket, and then dropped his body into the creek on the down-river side of the docks. The note I have since destroyed, so that no revelation can now arise out of it.

‘Only one other matter of interest remains for me to mention. My journey to Southampton was a doubly fateful one, for on board the *East Anglia* I again came face to face with a woman whom I had not seen for many years; in fact, I had often thought that she must be dead. She was Charlotte Cohen, Jacob Cohen’s daughter. She knew me instantly, and I believe she suspected my manner of life. Since that moment I have had the misgiving of which I have already spoken. I have known no ease. I have carried constantly with me the foreboding that I am nearing the end. As to Charlotte Cohen—or Charlotte Kaufmann, as I learn she now is—I need only say that in the days of my warm manhood I wronged her grievously. I should have married her.

‘I have now written all that is essential to you to know. In acting upon the disclosure you will have many things to consider, your mother and your sister being not the least of them. What course you should pursue—whether you should make these secrets public, or whether you should

screen, not me, but the honourable name that you have borne—I must leave to your own good judgment. I have offended, but I would not wish to see the old name of Markham dragged for that reason through the mire. Perhaps I have forfeited the right to be considered a Markham, and have only the sanction to be known and recorded as Stephen Elgarth. For the rest, it does not become me at this moment to moralize for your benefit. I would only say—keep a clear, straight course; and, in keeping it, be happy.

‘And now, if we meet no more, farewell; and remember me, with as much filial warmth as you may find still left in your heart, as

‘Your affectionate father,

‘BASIL MARKHAM.’

The blow of this letter mentally staggered Richard Markham. At last he had discovered the man with the hair of the hue of muddy flax. But now that he had found him the eyes of the world seemed to focus upon himself, to stare him into shame and confusion, and to make him wish for a place of escape in the bowels of the earth. He sank into a chair, and sat for some moments in a state in which his half-stunned thoughts floated in a drift of mist, thinking, yet not thinking. Then he unfolded the type-written

note to which his father had referred. He saw that it was addressed from Jewin Crescent, without either house number or date, and he read :

‘SIR,

‘I took the liberty of possessing myself of the articles of jewellery which accompany this letter. Circumstances have since arisen in my affairs which render their retention by me no longer desirable. The diamonds belong to Sir George Rowley, M.P., the pearl collar and pendant to Lady Diana Lindley, of Kingston Hill, and the other jewellery to the Marquis of Gainsford. I have ascertained that you are engaged to Sir George’s daughter, Miss Cicely Rowley, and that your sister is the *fiancée* of the new Marquis of Gainsford. For that reason I return the articles to you, with a trustful request that you will return them to their several owners. My object in not sending them to Sir George Rowley, Lord Gainsford, and Lady Lindley direct will be obvious. You have not been at loss—they have, and I have no wish that I should be impeded in my desire and intention to leave the country. The only other request and stipulation I make is that, before restoring the jewellery, you shall give me ample time—say six weeks—in

which to complete my self-banishment from a land in which I have no longer any human interest in remaining.

‘With thanks for your courtesy and favour,

‘I am,

‘Yours faithfully,

‘STEPHEN ELGARTH.’

The ingeniousness of this letter impressed Richard Markham less than the pathos of its last sentence, which quickened his sensitiveness and revived his beaten mind. His decision was promptly formed. He would wait twenty-four hours, and would see what the morrow would bring forth.

The morrow brought him the fulness of light. He read first of the finding of the decomposing body of Samuel Nickens, and next of the strange dying confession of one William Sharples in the London Hospital. Both these reports were linked together in the column of the newspaper in which he read them. Sharples, he learned, had acknowledged himself to be the murderer of Joseph Custer, and had accused the now dead Nickens of having given him the blow which fractured his skull and caused his death. Custer having lost a paper containing memoranda for the robbery of certain diamonds known to be on board the

homeward-bound Cape liner, *East Anglia*, and Sharples' mother, a ragpicker, having found the paper in an ashbin in Bevis Marks, Sharples himself had killed Custer with a jemmy in the same thoroughfare, his object having been to prevent any defeating interference by Custer in the plans which Nickens and himself had formed for possessing themselves of the diamonds, Nickens having succeeded in unravelling the cryptic memoranda which Custer's lost paper contained. While Sharples lay in the London Hospital, Nickens went to the East India Docks, and Nickens himself was there killed.

'Who, then,' inquired the report, 'was the murderer of Samuel Nickens?'

Markham had a feeling of ashes in his mouth. He now knew the whole story of the drama, from the rising to the falling of the curtain, and the burden of the knowledge seemed to detach him from the common lot of his fellow-men. He gloomily turned the sheets of his morning paper, and his wandering glance fell startlingly upon the headline, 'Cripplegate Great Fire.' He read until presently his throat swelled and hardened painfully. The report told him that in the débris upon the site of the house which formerly had been No. 113, Jewin Crescent, two charred and unrecognisable bodies had been found, the one

being that of a man, the other that of a woman. At the side of the woman, in a place where no doubt had been the pocket of her dress, had also been found a small mass of iron, which, although fused by the action of the fire, still retained enough of its original character to indicate that it had formed a bunch of house-breaking keys.

Markham read the words with misty eyes, and he understood the pathetic tragedy that lay silently entombed beneath them. Although he thought mournfully of his dead father, his memory lingered with the sad, lonely figure of Charlotte Kaufmann ; and as he recalled the moment when he first saw the strange keys in her hand, and remembered the pensive hopelessness that filled her eyes when he took his last farewell of her, he understood all, and understanding, he felt for her all the pain of poignant pity.

Presently he laid his paper aside and wrote two notes, with the design that they should bring Miss Cissie Rowley and Lord Robert Leslie to Cadogan Terrace within an hour. Then he sought Miss Nibs, with the object of exhorting her to be strong while he unfolded to her a melancholy story. When Lord Robert and Miss Cissie arrived the face of Miss Nibs was sorrowful and pale, but her eyes revealed no sign of weeping.

Mr. Richard led Miss Cissie and Lord Robert, Miss Nibs accompanying them, to his dead father's room, and there uncovered to their astonished eyes the Rowley diamonds and the Leslie jewels. Then, with letter and with verbal account, he disclosed his father's miserable story.

'Now, Cissie,' he said seriously, and in a voice filled with hardly-suppressed emotion, when he had finished, 'and you, too, my good Bob, Nellie and I both feel that we cannot marry with the secret of this stain upon our name. For that reason we tell you, who are more dear to us than any others, of the shame that has fallen upon us. What course we shall take must be decided by this unhappy moment. We cannot expect you to ally yourselves with our exposed disgrace; on the other hand, I feel—and God forgive me if I am wrong!—I feel that our father's wrong-doing should not be allowed to tarnish our own good name, and destroy our own life-happiness. If you still love us, and would have us to your hearts as before, we must, for your sakes, "let the dead bury their dead"; but if you feel that the old relationship cannot continue between us, I must break the news to my mother, and then place the revelations in the hands of the police.'

'Dick,' said Miss Cissie, with moist eyes, as he concluded, 'when I took you I accepted you

as I found you. I did not think of your father, and, except with regret, I do not intend to think of him now. I promised to marry you, Dick; not your father's faults.'

'That's true, Dick,' confirmed Lord Bob sympathetically. 'And what Miss Rowley has said to Dick, Nibbie,' he added, turning to comfort the sadly subdued Miss Nibs, 'applies equally to you and me. And there's another thing, Dick,' he renewed, 'nothing can be gained. The revelation can reveal, but it can do no more. Custer, Nickens, Sharples—your own poor father—are all beyond earthly reach. As he said, the play is at an end. There is little doubt that the dead man at Cripplegate is one whom we all knew; yet who could swear to it? It would be kinder to let him disappear—even to let him go to his rest, as he almost suggests, as Stephen Elgarth. It would be kinder to your mother, too. "Let the dead bury their dead," Dick.'

'But Charlotte Kaufmann—and the Goldbergs?' hesitated Markham thoughtfully.

'Do you think she would thank you for telling them? No, Dick,' affirmed Lord Bob emphatically. 'In every way it would be kinder to let the police simply know that your father has disappeared, and is missing. You can return the diamonds and collar to Sir George and Lady

Diana in the way that your father has suggested, and Miss Rowley and I will take our lot with you in keeping sacred the secret. Time will soften the rest.'

'Thank you, Bob,' returned Markham simply.

Miss Nibbie's response, with glistening eyes, was 'God bless you, Bob!' and a kiss.

Miss Cissie, gently foretasting the prerogative of wifehood, copied Miss Nibbie's example; and the two men, with meeting glances, and with emotions too strong for words, gripped each other's hands.

Then they returned to the morning-room, feeling the potency of the change that had come into their lives; feeling also the pathos of Basil Markham's strange, eventful history, and the tragic mournfulness of the finished Drama of Retribution upon which the curtain had been rung down.

THE END

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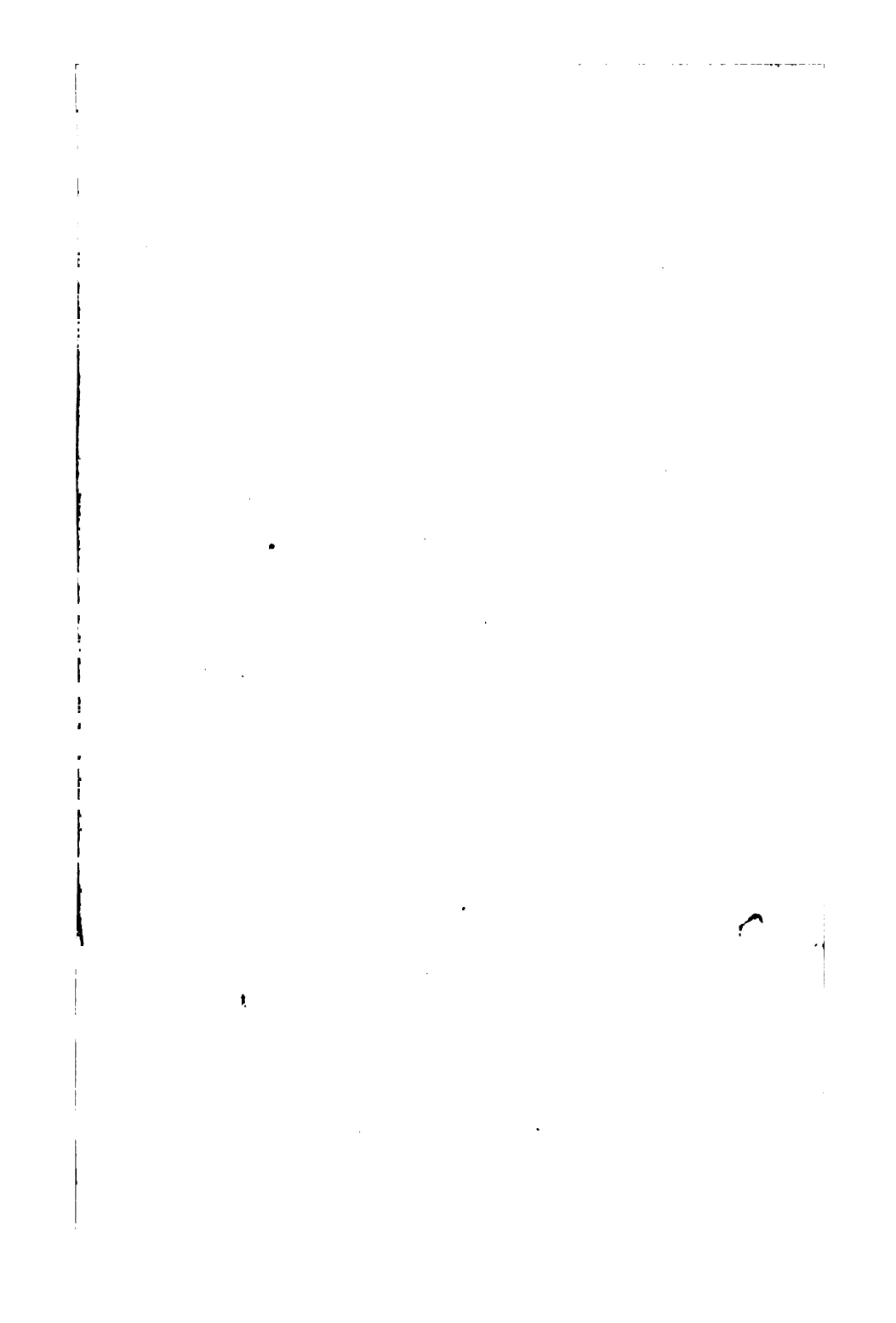
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